



Navigating teams successfully through disruptions: Challenges and Techniques

Theme: Exploring the Unexplored

Abstract ID: PMIBC-19-3-001

Prashanth Thimmavajjala

Principal Product Manager, Oracle

CONTENTS

Abstract.....	3
Introduction	3
Details of the paper.....	4
Conclusion	10
References	11

ABSTRACT

Disruptions of any kind are viewed as threats by teams due to the impact it has on various aspects of their work. Disruptions challenge the status-quo and put people out of their comfort zone. Teams are a collection of people with different personality traits and behaviours with most of them not wanting to be disturbed from the status quo, which makes navigating them through disruptions a challenging task. Even though disruptions are anticipated and necessary, team members have a sense of uncertainty, loss of relevance and unconsented or forced change. Managers need to make sure that all challenges and team dynamics are addressed in a progressive manner enabling the team to make the transformation successfully in order to be successful in the future. This paper tries to explore the various challenges that would be faced by the manager when the team is going through disruptions and what techniques can be used to make sure the transformation is smooth with everybody in the team on board. The paper will describe an actual case where a few of the challenges were encountered and how they were handled to make a successful transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations need to stay relevant and competitive in the market place and throughout their business cycles there are multiple strategic inflection points where they need to cope up with a disruption in their industry to sustain their competitive advantage. These disruptions could be in terms of technology, processes, systems etc. Organizations should be able to adapt themselves to these disruptions to stay competitive. Organizations are made of people and teams and it is important that these teams adapt to the disruption at various stages to make the organizations relevant in their industry. Unless the teams adapt to the disruptions, the transformation of the organization will be difficult and poses the risk of loss of business as well.

Disruptions mean uncertainty and challenging the status quo. Teams show reluctance to make the transition and embrace the disruption due to many implicit and explicit reasons with their current situation (Figure 1):

- **Clarity on the roles and responsibilities:** Team members are contented with their current roles and have full clarity and visibility on their responsibilities and the tasks that they are expected to deliver
- **Skills:** The skills required for their current role is something that they might have been an expert in or have worked on for many years which gives them a level of comfort with the nature of work to be done. Team members might have complementary skills to support each other.
- **Team camaraderie:** Team members would have a sense of bonding and camaraderie which makes their work life better and helps to resolve any technical challenges. It also gives team members a sense of security and oneness.

- **Predictable tasks:** There is a lot of clarity on the tasks that need to be done in the future and their expected outcomes, there is also clear roadmap of tasks and activities that needs to be taken up without any uncertainty.
- **Hygiene factors:** There could be a lot of other implicit and explicit hygiene factors that makes team members productive like work life balance, travel time to office, working hours, incentives, personal satisfaction with the type of role being handled etc

Based on the personal context of each team member, disruptions tend to impact one or many of the above stated status quo factors which makes them think of disruption as a threat and exhibit reluctance to change. This paper tries to explore the various challenges related to navigating team members through disruptions and discusses few of the techniques to overcome them and ensure that the team makes the transition successfully and is able to embrace the disruption gracefully.

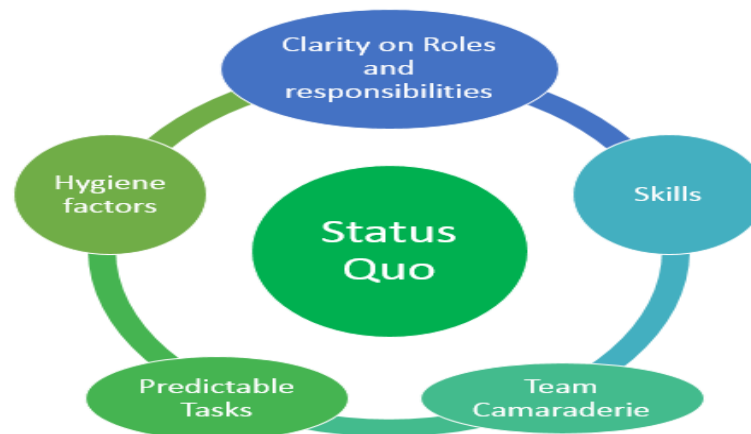


Figure 1: Status quo of Team members

DETAILS OF THE PAPER

TEAM COMPOSITION AND ITS IMPACT ON PROPENSITY TO CHANGE

Teams are a collection of individuals from varying experience, skills and background and each of them has their own personal traits which impacts their propensity or willingness to change. Team members can belong to any of the following groups:

- **Veterans:** These are team members who have been with the current organization for many years or they could be laterals with many years of career experience in a particular skill. Due to their longevity of service and also of industry experience, they have very low propensity to change to accommodate any disruption.

They are used to very old processes and procedures and have mastered the skills they have, which might be under the threat of being outdated. They are at the highest level of comfort in terms of job and skills and will show high resistance to any change. They have a strong bias due to their vast experience in old skills.

- **Mid-career professionals:** These team members maybe in the 7-12 years of experience range. Their skills are much more advanced and relevant than the veterans. They have marginal propensity to change to accommodate the disruption. They are willing to adapt to changes and explore new areas as they are not very highly experienced and would be interested in learning new skills. They could be slow in adapting due to the professional baggage that they carry of their past working experience which could have some amount of bias in their thinking.
- **Early stage professionals/Millennials:** These are team members who are either starting their career or have low experience of 2-5 years. This group has the highest propensity to change and is willing to experiment with new ideas, methodologies, processes and techniques required to adapt to the disruption. Their skills are latest and relevant and they can easily pick up new skills due to their high level of inquisitiveness and challenge-seeking attitudes. Since this group of team members have low experience levels, they willingly accept the disruption and they can come up with fresh ideas, methodologies etc. for adapting to the disruption with an unbiased view.

The group that forms the majority in the team would have a strong influence on the overall team's propensity to change as they might bias the group think. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the team members, their traits and their propensity to change and come up with ways to make them embrace the disruption.

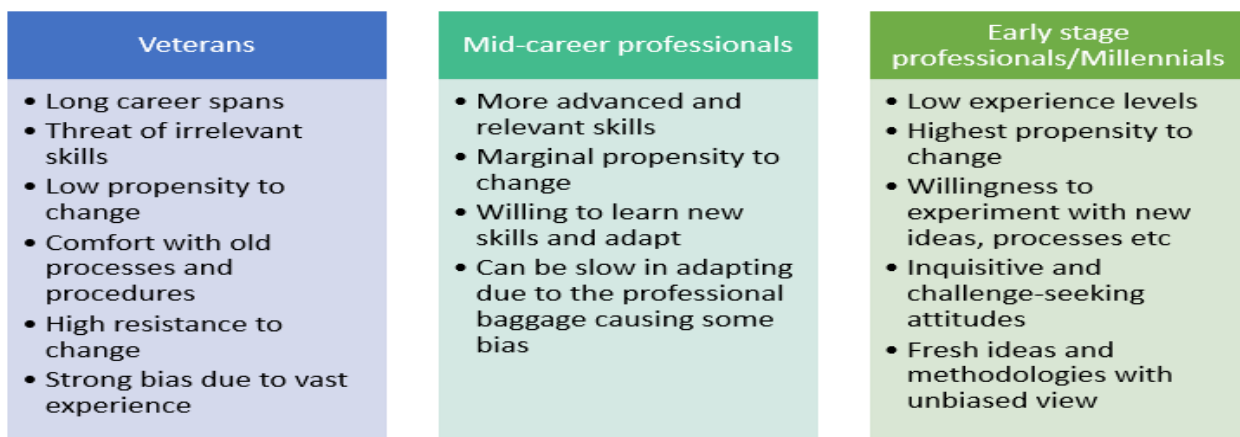


Figure 2: Team composition and propensity to change

CHALLENGES IN ADAPTING TO DISRUPTIONS

Team members display reluctance in adapting to disruptions due to various reasons which could be explicit, implicit, professional or personal and these become challenges to adapt to disruptions as a team. The project

manager needs to identify these reasons and devise mechanisms to overcome them for a successful transition. Few of the challenges are:

- **Lack of understanding the need for change:** Team members are happy with their current roles and processes that they follow. The intended output or results is being achieved with the current skills and procedures. This makes team members reluctant to change as they don't see a pressing need to change their skills, roles and processes. They do not see the disruption coming or the impact it is likely to have on their roles and responsibilities. They are contented with the status quo and the results it is able to achieve for them.
- **Fear of reskilling or adopting new processes:** Disruptions majorly require reskilling or adoption of new processes by the team members. Team members have the fear of having to unlearn whatever they are now an expert in and relearn a completely new technology, skill, process or methodology which they are totally unaware of. Their fear is mostly based on the challenges they might face in learning the new skill and also whether they will be able to excel in them and gain expertise in it, similar to their current skill. The uncertainty clouding the new skill makes the team members to be apprehensive about it.
- **Fear of additional future responsibility:** Team members would have a fear that even if they go ahead and learn the new skill or technology required to adapt to the disruption, they might be considered pioneers or early adopters and might be given additional responsibilities in the new skill which they might not be prepared for.
- **Fear of unforeseen challenges:** While some team members might come forward to pick up the new skills required to adapt to the disruption, they might fear that they would encounter some unforeseen challenges which they might not be able to resolve as they are not confident in the new area and will not even have a support system to rely on to find alternatives and solutions. In their current role, any challenges can be tackled using their own skill expertise or relying on other experts within or outside the team. With the new technology or skill, the expertise available will be limited and hence it will require lot of effort to resolve challenges.
- **Competing commitment [1]:** Some of the team members would be the star performers of the team and genuinely support the need for change to embrace the disruption but might not be productively doing anything to embrace the change. These team members would have a hidden competing goal which might work against the intended change that the team might be trying to bring about and it could be detrimental to the overall effort. It could be that they do not want to work with the new team or a specific member, they want to avoid tough assignment, they want to have full control of the work that they do, they do not want their incompetency to be exposed etc. [1]. These competing commitment are not explicit which makes it more challenging but it needs to be addressed understanding the impact it can have on the overall effort of embracing disruption.



Figure 3: Challenges in Adapting to Disruptions

ROLE OF THE PROJECT MANAGER IN EMBRACING DISRUPTIONS

Project Managers play a key role in facilitating the transition that their team needs to make to embrace the disruption successfully. As there are multiple factors that impact the transition, the project manager needs to take several measures and initiatives to ensure that all of them are addressed for a smooth transition. Few of the techniques that the project manager can use are:

- **Joint diagnosis of the disruption and the impending change:** Project managers need to follow inclusive methods to include the team members in jointly diagnosing the disruption, what it means to them and what changes they need to make to be able to embrace the disruption. This will help the team gain better understanding and also induce joint ownership in the change initiative yielding better results, than it being forced upon them top-down. [4]
- **Create new roles and responsibilities:** Based on the joint diagnosis, project manager will have to create new roles and responsibilities that ensures team members are moving out of their silos and proactively taking up new tasks and initiatives to align with the change that is to be introduced. Project manager should ensure that the team members are assigned different roles based on their strengths and also their ability to pick up new skills. [4]
- **Ensure Task Alignment:** Creating new roles will not ensure progress with change unless there is a clear alignment of their tasks to the change intended. New tasks may have to be created or the old tasks need to be modified to ensure alignment to the change initiative. Without task alignment, team members will tend to go back to their old methods and processes as they are comfortable with it and the change process will never get initiated. Task alignment will also force elimination of old tasks that are obsolete and not aligned to embrace the disruption forcing team members to start following the new tasks and procedures. [4]
- **Facilitate reskilling and neoskilling:** Based on the new responsibilities and tasks, project managers can define the new skills the team members need to pick up to perform their role better and facilitate learning

them. Team members will also proactively identify skills that they need based on their daily activities in the new role performing new tasks. This will force members to learn these skills on their own as they see the need themselves and the project manager needs to facilitate these trainings wherever required. Project managers should also facilitate Neoskilling of the team members on anticipated or forecasted skills, which intends to imbibe non-obviousness into the thought process and inculcating attitudinal changes to proactively and autonomously tackle any and all kinds of eventualities in the new uncharted areas as a result of the disruption. Project managers should also educate team members of the relevance of the new skills in the backdrop of the disruption and the opportunities it brings about. Whenever required, project managers will need to liaise with experts in other teams or outside the organization to help team members learn new skills and overcome challenges [2,4]

- **Eliminate additional effort:** If embracing the change and doing the new responsibilities along with their existing responsibilities requires a lot of additional effort, then team members are likely to resist and underperform. Project managers need to identify the effort required to implement the change and offload the team members from obsolete tasks and low value add tasks so that they can dedicate more time towards the new role and responsibilities towards embracing the disruption. [3]
- **Help in identifying and resolving challenges:** Project managers need to work with high performers to identify their competing commitments through detailed conversations and mentor ways to overcome them. Managers should work closely with team members, empathize with them, build trust with them and address any uncertainties, apprehensions and competing commitments that they might have. This will help the team perform better towards embracing the disruption [1].
- **Display leadership commitment:** Project managers need to show their commitment to the change through their words, action, initiatives and activities consistently so that the team members also show equal amount of commitment to ensure success of the transition. Managers need to themselves stop doing activities that are not aligned to the initiatives towards the disruption sending out a strong signal to the team members on the commitment levels. Managers also need to frequently review progress on the initiative and help out the team wherever required. Managers should provide the future tasks and responsibilities along with providing and displaying assurance to the team about their support during difficult times as well [3]

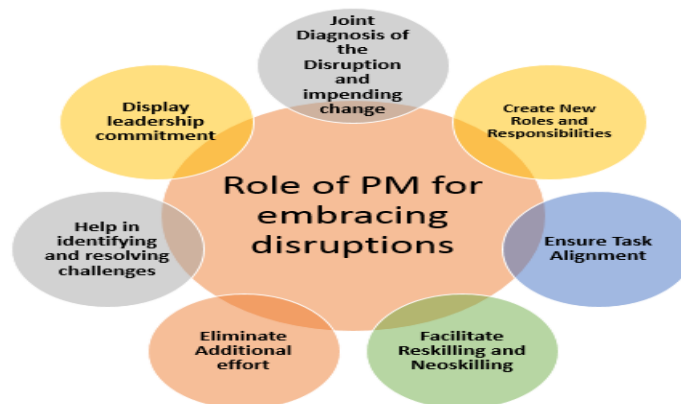


Figure 4: Role of PM for Embracing Disruptions

CASE IN POINT: SUCCESSFUL TRANSFORMATION FROM ONE TESTING TOOL TO ANOTHER

The project that will be discussed in this case was taken up as part of an organization wide initiative to move from one testing tool (Tool A) to another (Tool B). Tool A was a commercial tool and used across multiple projects in the organization which was a huge cost in terms of license fees. Close to 20 product teams have been using the tool for more than a decade now and are comfortable with the tool and have the skills required for it. Tool B was part of the company's own product portfolio and came as part of a recent acquisition. As this tool was an internal tool, there would not be much of a cost overhead for the entire organization. It was decided that all 20 product teams will move to the internal tool from existing tool A and the transition was to complete over a period of one year.

This was a clear disruption for all the product teams, they had been using Tool A for the past decade and had developed custom frameworks and code based on that tool and possessed high level of expertise in Tool A as it was an industry standard. Tool B was competitor to Tool A and was not very mature, none of the teams had ever worked on it and there was no expertise that they possessed. All product teams were now forced to learn and understand Tool B, transform all their existing artefacts from Tool A to B and also rewrite all customizations which they had developed over a decade with Tool B in a span of a year. The approach followed by one of the 20 teams is discussed in detail here.

The product testing team being discussed here had a team size of three people. One of them was a veteran with 15+ years of experience in the same team, he was the creator of the code, framework and other artefacts using Tool A for the product. The second and the third member were mid-career professionals with 10+ years of experience in the same team, they had heavy expertise in Tool A and had reached comfort level with the code and frameworks using Tool A. All the three of them showed heavy reluctance to move towards the new tool mostly because of lack of skills in the new tool and lack of bandwidth.

To ease the situation the project manager hired another person from outside the organization into the team. The PM then discussed with the entire team on the current state, the reason for the movement to the new tool and created a roadmap of the activities as well. The PM also discussed individually with each team member on their challenges with this disruption and what kind of support they would need to make this transition. The team members provided a lot of suggestions, potential risks, areas that will need more effort etc. The PM then went on to make the new team member dedicatedly work on gaining expertise with the new tool and creating all the code and artefacts using that tool while the rest of the team continued working with the old tool. The entire team would periodically review the progress made on the new tool and the PM reemphasized multiple times to the team on the criticality of the transition. The PM also facilitated discussions with the development team of the Tool B whenever there were critical showstopper issues or challenges.

Once the entire artefacts were recreated with Tool B, the PM facilitated learning sessions where the new member of the team would train the seniors on the new tool and the nuances of using it. The PM periodically checked on how the veterans were picking up the tool and measured their progress. Once the PM was convinced that the entire team was well equipped to start using the tool, he identified tasks of the veterans that were going to be obsolete after moving to the new tool and eliminated them to free up some time. He initiated a pilot phase for two months, where both the tools were used in parallel for the same activity and the output was compared. After completion of the pilot phase, the PM slowly started moving tasks more towards the new tool and less on the old tool based on the team's increasing comfort with the new tool. Over a period of time, 100% of the tasks were done using the new tool by all the team members. As the transition was done over a long period with the co-existence of the old tool, the team members did not show a lot of reluctance in making the transition. Once the transition was successful, the Tool A was completely decommissioned and the team started using Tool B for all activities. The PM then went ahead and put up a formal process and documentation related to Tool B so that it becomes the standard for the team.

The PM in this case used few of the techniques detailed in this paper and was able to navigate the team successfully through the disruption and helped them to adapt the change.

CONCLUSION

Disruptions can be challenging times for team members due its impact on multiple aspects of their work. Teams need to make multiple changes to embrace the disruption and project managers play a crucial role in identifying the challenges, addressing them and enabling the team to make the required changes. Project managers need to work closely with their teams and using a few methodologies can ensure that the transition is done successfully in a smooth manner. The success of the teams in embracing disruptions determines the success of the overall organization in the new era.

REFERENCES

[1] Kegan, Robert and Lahey, Lisa, "The Real Reason People Won't Change", *Harvard Business Review* November 2001, <https://hbr.org/2001/11/the-real-reason-people-wont-change>

[2] Prasad, Lakshmanan and S.Ramachandran, "Neoskilling for Digital Transformation and the Artificial Intelligence Revolution", First edition 2019, Wiley

[3] Sirkin, Harold L; Keenan, Perry and Jackson, Alan, "The Hard Side of Change Management", *Harvard Business Review* October 2005, <https://hbr.org/2005/10/the-hard-side-of-change-management>

[4] Spector, Bert; Eisenstat, Russell; Beer, Michael, "Why Change Programs Don't produce change", *Harvard Business Review* December 1990, <https://hbr.org/1990/11/why-change-programs-dont-produce-change>