

“Leading the way in BT TV and Broadband”

Jérôme Tassel, Director, TV and Broadband Services and Systems Engineering, BT

When Jérôme Tassel was driving in the Lake District this summer, a large boulder rolled down the valley and landed in front of his car. He wasn't hit, but this narrow escape caused him to reflect on how the boulder was a blocker, just like things that get in the way of progress at work.

BT has achieved brilliant innovation in the six years since it launched its TV and broadband services, but staff surveys showed that employee satisfaction and motivation was at rock-bottom.

“We needed our teams to be faster, and to feel safer and happier,” Tassel said.

A key question that he wanted answered was how a software organisation can measure the success of its teams. He found Google's *Accelerate State of DevOps Report*, which regularly surveys around 4,000 professionals from 2,000 companies to assess the state of the industry, and uses four metrics to measure software engineering success: deployment frequency, lead time for changes, time taken to restore service, and change failure rate.

Results from six years of *State of DevOps* suggests that in the most successful IT companies,

- New products are deployed on demand
- Lead time for change is less than a day
- Time to restore service is less than an hour, and
- Change failure rate is, on average, 0 to 15 per cent.

But the challenge Tassel faced was, how to achieve this success within his own teams?

“So we asked people, what stops them being awesome? What are the blockers? Our end goal was to help people to remove the blockers, the things that get in the way of transformation. Because transformational leadership is all about inspiring people to do more than they thought they could do.”

Employing some external advice from consultant Dan North, BT began focusing on goals rather than tasks, giving people much more autonomy to make decisions, and making everybody's activity and progress visible to everyone else. Managers were given training to help change their mindset from being the “great man or great woman” who makes all the decisions, to relinquishing control and trusting their staff to make decisions. Crucially, Tassel also introduced quarterly rolling wave planning, an operating model that links teams to outcomes and accelerates transformation.

“You get everybody from a portfolio together in a room for two days, so we'll have 140 people there, to align over what they are going to do for the next three months. You spend the first half day looking back over the last three months, seeing whether they achieved what they set out to achieve, but more importantly what they learned that everyone else should know about. Then we agree the goals for the next three months, bearing in mind our one or two-year strategic aims, we agree the priorities, and we build teams to suit the goals.

“We now have 42 product teams, and they all have to be aligned or we will get strange results. You look at the strategy, the objectives you want to deliver, over one or two years, and break them down into little things that people can tackle over a quarter.

“I provide the location, the food and the entertainment – we might have a BBQ in the evening, play some games – the other reason is to create that social network between people. But this is real work, it’s not some fun awayday with post-it notes and sharpies. It’s not optional, it’s integral, it’s where decisions get made. If you’re not there, you’re not there and somebody else will make the decisions for you.”

Tassel describes these meetings as his “touchpoint” to be connected to all his teams and what they are doing, every quarter. “I’ve just done seven of these for quarter three, 14 days of quarterly wave planning affecting 450 people. It’s knackered, but it is absolutely brilliant. After two weeks of these I know exactly how people feel – what they’ve done, what they’re going to do and what problems they have. It is awesome, and the teams find it really refreshing.

“With the more mature teams now, they just make it into whatever they need. They know what they need and they just make it happen over the two days.

“The great thing is that it gets everybody talking about all the aspects of what we need to modernise: principles, automation, tools, goals, agile ways of working, dependencies, which teams we need – we cover everything in two days and it’s really energising for everyone. You never need to do a transformation because you are transforming all the time.”

The results speak for themselves, he said: “We used to release new features twice a year in TV, now we deploy weekly, daily in some instances. It’s made a massive difference.” Now he’s taken to holding quarterly wave planning meetings with the senior leadership team too.

Tassel added that research has shown that the most high-performing IT teams in any industry spend 50 per cent of their time building new features, and it’s important for leaders to allow them to spend the other half of their time attending meetings, embedding their learning, and getting better at what they do. “Agile working is not fluffy, it’s really tiring and demanding, much more intense than following an agreed plan,” he said. “That’s why it’s important to have this 50/50 and let people take time to step back.”

In summary, he said, this is what he has learned about how to build faster, happier and safer teams: “Inspire people to change, explain why and what the North Star is, then unleash them, which means you let go, you empower them, remove the shackles.

“Then you support them with training, with a cloud platform, with some coaches, then unblock whatever they find is blocked. You then acknowledge the things you can’t change. Then you reach respect, then you amplify and share what they’ve done, and then what happens is, people network. And when people network, that’s when magic happens.”