The Role of Soft Skills in Building Strong DevOps Leads

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As an industry, we spend a lot of time talking about the process and technology that make up a good DevOps practice. We have a strong focus on the development, IT operations, QA" and security roles. We debate tools and automation strategies. We wax philosophical about DevOps culture.

What is either lacking entirely or simply glossed over in that conversation is what I would consider the backbone of any good DevOps team–the people.

You might assume by "people" I mean their skills with the technology or their expertise with a certain process. Those two things are important, but all things being equal, the people aspect of DevOps I am referring to is really more simple–or even more basic–than that. It all starts with the culture that is defined by the lead.

As with any cross-functional discipline, teamwork is essential to the adoption and success of your DevOps practice. At its core, DevOps is about collaboration among people from a variety of teams and departments. It brings together multiple disciplines, people and processes with the common goal of high quality and high efficiency output. DevOps relies so heavily on teamwork that without strong leadership, your DevOps culture and the success of your practice are destined for a rocky road at best.

A strong DevOps leader will need to bring together people in roles that have either been traditionally siloed or are now being done by fewer people. This is no easy feat, however building trust, earning respect, communicating effectively and motivating everyone toward the common goal is paramount to the success of the DevOps team.

These traits–trust and respect, communication and the ability to motivate–are not unique to DevOps leads, rather they are the key characteristics that make up any strong leader. By putting them in the context of DevOps, the importance of each in the process and culture is irrefutable.

Trust and Respect

Paul Zak, the founding director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies and a professor of economics, psychology and management at Claremont University, led a study to better understand the neuroscience of trust. His team found that the effect of trust on work

performance, engagement and loyalty were huge. Respondents indicated that employees with high trust had 106% more energy, were 76% more engaged and 88% said they would recommend their company as a place to work to family and friends.

The numbers might not come as a surprise, but how you achieve high trust might. First and foremost, be vulnerable. Do not be afraid to ask for help. This not only exhibits the trust you have in the people on the team, it also demonstrates the sign that you are secure in yourself as a leader.

The trust factor for a DevOps lead is multifaceted. The team must trust the lead enough to also trust his/her vision for the process. By showing vulnerability and leaning of the subject matter experts from each discipline for input, you start to build rapport with the team and the process becomes owned by the different functions involved. By asking for help, you invoke the natural tendency to cooperate. That cooperation leads to mutual trust. And by earning trust, you also earn their respect.

Communication

As with any cross-functional team, communication should be viewed as critical an element as your DevOps tools. A successful DevOps lead will be able to understand and speak the languages unique to each discipline. By understanding the nuance and meanings of the words used by the IT operations teams, QA, security and development, the lead can easily help communicate goals, set expectations and establish rules of engagement. Through daily communication, the team will be able to reduce friction and become far more effective as a group.

Motivating Toward a Common Goal

Former Boston Bruins coach Harry Sinden said it best, "Putting on the same jersey doesn't make a team. You're still a collection of individuals until you find a common goal."

The DevOps lead who motivates the team toward that common goal will find success. But how do you do that? To find out what motivates the people on your team you need to talk to them and get to know them. Involve them in developing the overall strategy. Seek their input and make sure they feel they have ownership of the outcome.

Set milestones and celebrate accomplishments. Reward success. Provide feedback and coaching in the moment–both good and bad.

The team that feels like they are part of something are no longer a collection of individuals.

In the end, when you are assessing your DevOps practice and culture, make sure you take a long hard look at the people. They are truly the backbone of any DevOps practice. The need to technical prowess and experience should not be underscored, however, make sure you look for someone who has those skills plus all of the necessary attributes of a true leader. The success of your DevOps practice may depend on it.

— Sara Faatz