Why Process Fail IT During a Crisis

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Technology is a critical component in any business. During any crisis, if the IT organization is unable to respond, it will put the entire enterprise at risk. Yet, during a crisis, the thing that often inhibits an IT organization from responding effectively is the very thing that is supposed to save it - a reliance on disciplined processes.

The fundamental problem is that the introduction of process disciplines into IT operational management over the last decade has created an atmosphere in which middle IT management is often afraid to make decisions and lacks both creativity and leadership skills. However, during a crisis, what is required more than anything else are these two skills.

While an IT organization may function admirably under normal operations, very few organizations have matured their operational process disciplines to the point of being able to handle massive service or business disruptions effectively. They may have disaster recovery protocols in place, but from an operational perspective their processes become overwhelmed during a crisis by the sheer volume and pace of operational demands required of them. It is at this point that processes break down and the IT organization devolves into a state of unmanaged chaos. It is also at this point that certain members of the IT team will "rise up" and "go above and beyond" to resolve things - giving affirmation to the cowboy culture that IT organizations have battled against for years.

To overcome these challenges, the IT leadership team must invest in developing both leadership and creative problem solving skills at all levels of their organization. These two attributes are required not just in senior management, but at all levels of the organization. During a crisis, IT teams may find themselves isolated, lacking clear decision models and with only limited information. They must therefore be able to self-organize, assess the situation, establish immediate lines of communication and be able to assign and take leadership roles in a dynamic fashion.

It is Not the Process that Fails the Achievement

It is important to understand that during a crisis, it is not the process that fails. Failure is caused by an over-reliance on an overly prescriptive process. In an effort to adopt process discipline and rigor, IT organizations often adopt a highly prescriptive approach to process design. The challenge is that the more prescriptive a process, the more complex it must become. If it tries to account for every small action to be taken, then it must account for all possible actions. This complexity consequently limits its volume capacity. While highly prescriptive and complex processes can work in a highly predictable environment, IT organizations rarely qualify.

Yet, these highly prescriptive and complex processes are what many organizations have implemented. When a crisis occurs, the rate and volume of activity simply overwhelms the capacity of this highly prescriptive process. But it was not the process that failed. Had that process been built on the assumption that the process executors did not require that high level of prescription; it could have been simple enough to scale and handle the volume that a crisis generates. Which leads us to the crux of the problem: IT organizations build highly prescriptive and complex processes because they do not trust the leadership skills and creativity of their executors.

Creating Leadership & Creativity Skills

It is this gap in trust that leads to process failure during a crisis. Ironically, the missing leadership and creativity skills that lead to an overly prescriptive process are also the two most important skills needed to effectively managing during a crisis. This makes the development of these skills all that more powerful. Not only will it enable you to build processes that are not reliant on highly prescriptive elements, it will also give your organization the capabilities it needs to

effectively respond during a crisis.

Creating these leadership and creativity skills essentially comes down to three fundamental building blocks:

- Developing Operational Intent
- Embedding Business Value as the Foundational Decision Paradigm
- Creating a Culture of Accountability and Empowerment

Developing Operational Intent

What is often missing from most process design efforts is a solid foundation of the intent of the process. Every process should have its own mission. Its intent and spirit should be clear. Often, it is not. People are taught to follow the process without thinking and to simply adhere to its highly prescriptive elements. When it then breaks down under volume, is it any surprise that they do not know what to do?

The military applies a concept called "Commander's Intent." They have learned that attempting to centralize decision making often leads to disastrous results. They have come to realize that a battle plan is typically good only until the battle begins. They instead have instituted this doctrine of "Commander's Intent" (or mission-oriented command) as a mechanism to instill the desired outcome with a broad set of directions, but leave "in the trenches" decision making at the field level. This approach does not try to be overly prescriptive with detailed direction around every action. It instead focuses on the primary objectives to be achieved. But it requires trust and a commitment to this style of leadership and management.

IT leaders must embrace the same approach. You must move away from an overly prescriptive process design model and instead focus on operational intent. What is the mission of each process? If everything begins to fall apart, what spirit of intent should guide the teams and field leaders in how they execute their mission?

Interestingly, taking this approach and focusing teams around intent rather than prescriptive process begins to create the trust that is needed. By communicating to your teams that you are not going to tell them what to do, step-by-step, but only tell them what you expect the outcome to be, you communicate a trust in their abilities and judgment. It is the first step in the process.

Embedding Business Value as the Foundational Decision Paradigm

Operational Intent and laying the foundation for trust are the key first steps. But a problem remains that will inhibit IT organizations from being able to effectively manage in a crisis - the decision paradigm that often permeates IT organizations.

The size and complexity of most IT organizations has created a "fog of war" between IT and their business customers. Most of the IT team is so focused on their specific technical domain that they have lost sight of the business drivers and value that IT is meant to serve. As a consequence, when decisions are made they are often underpinned by a technology-driven decision paradigm. Decisions are driven by things like compatibility, technical architectures, supportability and "technology roadmaps." These are all valid considerations, but they put the IT organization on the wrong footing.

The foundational decision paradigm must be business value. During a crisis, there will simply be too many things that require a response. Decisions will need to be made to apply resources to those things that are most critical, but how will those decision be made? Organizations often rely on their business continuity protocols to guide those decisions. That is a good start as they are often built from Business Impact Analyses that seek to understand the business value of specific applications or services. But these inevitably only operate at the highest levels. During a crisis, many of the decisions that ultimately affect the supportability of those critical applications or services are made at one or more abstraction layers removed from that visibility.

Because most IT organizations only discuss business impact and value during the business continuity exercises, they have little foundation from which to make decisions around technical problems that arise during a crisis. This needs to change. You cannot expect a team that never evaluates technology from a business-value perspective to suddenly make that leap during a crisis. Yet it is this lack of a business-value decision paradigm that causes many good IT teams to make bad decisions.

The business-value decision paradigm must be embedded at all levels of the organization and made a core discipline in the

management of operations. Every decision that is made must be founded in an understanding of the business value that it will drive or support - and every manager must be able to communicate that relationship. There are a number of strategies that you can employ to change the decision paradigm, but the key is that it cannot be something that is only used during a crisis. It must be the foundation for how the IT organization operates at every level. Only then will your teams be sufficiently oriented to understanding the business value impact of the decisions they must make during a crisis.

Creating a Culture of Accountability & Empowerment

The final building block is to create a culture that enables and encourages these leadership and creative problem solving traits. Many IT cultures today thrive on inertia and risk aversion. People are rewarded for not taking risks and for playing it safe. Those that dare to challenge the status quo are seen with skeptical eyes as the masses ponder how long it will be until "this too passes."

Ironically, this cultural dynamic not only creates a lack of trust and the challenges that have been described in this article, but it also creates a very unfulfilling work environment for your teams. While your staff may succumb to the reality of your culture, most people do not actually like it. They prefer to come to work in an environment that is dynamic, engaging and stimulating. They prefer to be challenged and given the opportunity to grow. They may actually resist it at first, being gun-shy from years of failed attempts, but deep down this is what most will prefer. The question is, can you give it to them?

Creating a culture of accountability and empowerment seems simple and common sense on the surface. But it requires some fundamental shifts in how the organization is managed. It relies on a foundation of trust to work. This culture must permeate the organization under normal operations. You cannot expect people to blindly "follow the process" during the day and suddenly be expected to feel accountable and empowered during a crisis.

During a crisis, your team members - at all levels of the organization - must feel empowered to act. They must have confidence that they understand the operational intent. They must feel that they can adequately assess the relative business impact of any decision they make and they must feel a compelling duty to act in the interest of their customers. To do so, they must feel empowered and accountable, at some level, during day-to-day operations. If you are training your teams to follow highly prescriptive processes to the letter, it is unlikely that they are feeling either empowered or accountable.

Accountability really comes down to one thing: expectations. Do you expect and reward your staff for following the process or for realizing the spirit of your organizational objectives? If you haven't designed your processes in an overly prescriptive manner, the answer should be both. The point is, however, that their first obligation should be to achieve objectives. The process is just the tool you have provided for them to help ensure that result. If you allow your teams to fall back on a reliance on "but we followed the process" when results have not been achieved, you are not creating a culture of accountability. You must expect them to think critically and creatively in every situation and apply the tools and process that have been provided solely for the purpose of meeting your operational intent.

Summary - It All Comes Down to You

As an IT leader, there is one final thing that you must understand. In the end, it all comes down to you. As you review the three building blocks needed to develop leadership and creativity within your teams, there is actually very little that they can do on their own.

It can be a hard pill to swallow, but if your teams have some of these challenges, the root of them is almost certainly you and your leadership team. It is up to you to distill and articulate an operational intent. It is up to you to ask the difficult questions of your teams that demand they relate everything to the underlying business value. It is up to you to set and have expectations that your teams understand operational intent and act in the interest of your customers. They really cannot do this on their own. The fundamental building blocks are yours to work with - what will you build?

Describing these building blocks is easy, but it can be very hard to actually implement them. It takes energy and commitment to fundamentally change the way you operate and manage your teams. You must demonstrate trust in your team's ability to act without overly prescriptive processes. You must be willing to repeatedly and patiently explain the operational intent and give your teams time to absorb it. You must be willing to invest the cycles in forcing your teams to understand and articulate the business impact ramifications and relationships in everything they do - and not subvert the process for the sake of expediency. You must be willing to trust your teams to act and then hold them accountable for the

results.

It is not an easy task, but making the investment results in a team that is able to take command of a situation and act in the best interest of both the customer and the organization. Whether it is during day-to-day operations or in a time of crisis, that is the kind of team that will get the job done.