



Release and Deployment

An ITSM narrative

Daniel McLean



**GO
LIVE**



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DANIEL McLEAN



IT Governance Publishing

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PREFACE

During a consulting engagement, I was interviewing a high performing and very successful EVP of sales for a multi-billion dollar company. We discussed IT, its role in leveraging business capabilities, and its historical performance in providing that leverage at his company.

I told him I was trying to identify what IT could do to provide the greatest amount of leverage for the business. If it were up to him, what would he have IT concentrate on above all else? What would he like IT to have as its number one priority?

I expected a laundry list of technology tools to aid in managing his sales force, prospects and customers. I was a little surprised at his instant response, “Don’t break anything that’s working.” There is tremendous insight and truth in what he said.

There are some best practice processes that are foundational and need to be implemented first. There are others that can be enabled more slowly.

Imagine you’re the head of a company whose IT organization can’t effectively restore service after incidents. When a business service fails, IT might or might not be able to get it working, or even know what to do to make it work again.

If you can’t depend on IT to restore service, then you would either want to change the people in your IT organization, or come up with another way to provide that business leverage.

Preface

Just as an effective incident management process is required in any IT organization, so is an equally effective release and deployment process. They are part of the group of best practice processes needed from the start.

Much of the work involved in enabling release and deployment processes involves changing how people work. The words, “People – Process – Tools,” are in that order for a reason. If People don’t embrace the activity, then the Process and Tools won’t matter. Changing people’s behavior is one of the hardest things we do in business and something IT people find most difficult.

High performing IT organizations learn how to change people’s behavior as easily as they change technologies. Changing behavior is one of the most difficult things you will ever do in business. IT is often at a disadvantage because IT organizations are not known for their strong people skills but that doesn’t mean they can’t learn.

This is one in a series of books designed to help you understand how others implemented new processes and made the necessary changes to people’s behavior.

These fictionalized narratives are based on the actual experience of people just like you ... dealing with the same types of people and issues you face every day.

Look at what worked ... see what failed ... understand the traps to avoid. Learn from the characters’ successes and avoid their mistakes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr McLean is a consultant who has designed, implemented and operated processes supporting ITSM for over 12 years. He has worked in IT for over 20 years.

He has been involved in the development of global best practice standards and courseware customized to company-specific operational practices and needs. He has worked in the US and the Middle East.

Mr McLean is the author of *The ITSM Iron Triangle: Incidents, Changes and Problems, No One of Us Is As Strong As All of Us: Services, Catalogs and Portfolios, Integrated Measurement – KPIs and Metrics for ITSM and Availability and Capacity Management in the Cloud*.

These narratives are designed as both standalone works and components of a larger integrated story arc covering the ITSM world and its challenges.

Mr McLean's consultancy focuses on fusing best practices from multiple ITSM standards into practical operational processes, optimized for each organization's particular environment and needs. He provides this support at the design, implementation and daily operation levels.

Among other honors, Mr McLean holds multiple ITSM related best practice and ISO/IEC certificates.

Mr McLean holds both Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Cornell University.

Mr McLean resides in Chicago, Illinois, US.

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INTRODUCTION

No IT organization can survive for long without an effective release and deployment process.

Without it, IT will either be supplanted by a third party organization at the demands of the business, or the entire company will collapse. An IT organization without an effective release and deployment process is like an IT organization without incident or change management.

Like a public utility, release and deployment is highly visible only when its failures disrupt the business. When done correctly, very little activity should be visible to the business.

Release and deployment processes exist to plan, build, test, schedule, and control the deployment into production of releases that will increase the capabilities of the business without damaging the integrity of the current services.

Release and deployment touches virtually all of the ITSM processes. Each one of those connections presents a risk of failure points that need to be managed. There are so many ways release and deployment can vividly fail that it is a testament to the skill and commitment of those involved when it quietly succeeds without notice by others.

But not every release deployed into production goes smoothly. When something does go wrong, a trickle of calls and alerts can quickly become an avalanche. The service desk is soon overwhelmed with calls from users. The pagers and phones of the development and support teams light up at all hours of the day. Senior business leaders are

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on the phone to the leadership of IT yelling about lost revenue and threatening replacement by third parties.

Within IT, the finger of blame always points to the owners of the impacting process – Release. This is unfair and displays the confusion that often exists in IT about the exact nature of deploying releases, who is involved, and the ways in which things can go wrong.

At its simplest level, release is a noun, describing a number of changes which are built and tested to be deployed together. Deployment is a verb describing the enablement of a release in the live production environment.

The actual introduction of the release into live production is just the tip of a process that interacts with a number of other organizations, such as application development, quality assurance, infrastructure, business relationship management, change, finance and others. The challenge is that these organizations are not normally part of the release manager's team, except on a loan and as available basis. Regardless, the release and deployment manager remains accountable for the result.

To succeed in that role, release and deployment managers need to successfully navigate the web of relationships between those groups and, more importantly, the people in those organizations. Success is highly dependent on the ability to manage, by influence, those other teams. In this case that means not just managing your relationships with others but also helping them manage their relationships with each other.

This is especially true in the foundational area of business requirements and its critical link with design and development. You often see IT organizations celebrate their

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activity and achievement, only to find out they have failed to meet the needs of the business. They failed because they were successful at doing the wrong thing. They did it right but it was not what the business needed.

The minimum essential steps that need to be taken are to empower a role gathering the business requirements, ensure it is tightly coordinated with design and development in a way that is responsive to the dynamic business environment, and charge the release manager with building connections between the functional knowledge towers. That level of agile engagement is difficult. Even with the right person in place, it takes practice and time to become proficient.

The next time someone raises questions about resourcing release and deployment, or delaying its enablement, tell them that these are not essential questions.

Remind them that the real question is, “Do you and your IT organization want to survive”?

All actions, places, organizations, people and events described, while based on real experiences, are fictitious. Any resemblance to real people, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any resemblance to actual places, organizations or events is entirely coincidental.

CHAPTER 1: WINNING THE JOB

Megan rubbed her fingertips against each other, giving the impression she was either praying for guidance or contemplating her prey. She took a slow, very deliberate breath and paused. As the silence filled the room, her smile made it clear she was looking for a victim, not guidance. And it was my bad luck to be the quarry sitting across the desk from her.

I was tired of job hunting. It had been almost four months since Jessica, my boss at the last company, was forced out in some smooth manipulations by a few other directors. Apparently they were jostling for a soon to be announced VP vacancy and she was just the first casualty in what became a sharp-elbowed conflict for supremacy. It was not unusual, just what goes on at that level in most big companies. What I found perplexing was that every time I saw it, the company's senior leadership was well aware of what was happening. They knew it did nothing for the stockholders or the customers, yet stayed out of it and almost encouraged it. Perhaps it was because that is how they all rose to their positions. Or maybe it was their way to determine who had what it takes to work at their level. I'd probably never get the chance to find out.

Once Jessica had been ousted, the other directors created systematic cases to clean out her entire team, regardless of their individual performance. This scorched earth behavior was very standard behavior and they were very efficient at it. About the only thing they didn't do was to salt the earth and conduct some sort of ritual public mutilation.

And of course I was one they pushed out after Jessica.

1: Winning the Job

The job market was still weak in this part of the country, so being forced out of a company was definitely a career threatening situation. I knew there were a lot of candidates for each job in the area. All of them reasonably qualified so it was hard to go wrong. It was just the way employers liked it, because it kept the staff quiet and obsequious. Networking was the only way to find a position and even then you had to stand out from the rest in some unique way. But when almost your entire network is out of work too, it doesn't help you a lot.

Megan leaned across her desk. Her words snapped me back to the interview.

“Tell me, Chris. What makes you more appropriate for this position than the other people I've talked to this week? Why should I take a chance on you?” Then she glanced at her watch and huffed as if she were behind schedule and had three more people waiting outside her office for interviews.

I sat silently for a moment, composing an answer that wouldn't sound like, “Because I'm the best you are going to see and you'd be a fool not to hire me. Release may not be my career aspiration, but I've done this before and am so over-qualified for this role that I can do it standing on my head while holding my breath.”

But after all the interviews I'd had over the last couple of months, I knew that would be unwise, unless I was looking to cut the interview very short. I started to speak, but with the exquisite timing of a chess grandmaster, she cut me off.

“Let me put it differently. I just don't understand why you would even consider applying for this job. You'd be bored to tears in a week. I mean, after all, you have an amazing

1: Winning the Job

background. You must know so much more about the release and implementation of apps than anyone else here ... even me, and I've been through one of those 'All-Told' fundamental classes for IT services."

I mentally winced at her apparent lack of awareness and understanding. Perhaps this was a test to see if I knew what she was talking about and how, or would, I correct her.

Megan leaned back in her chair, looking oh so contented with her questioning. It was a well-structured inquiry. It was seemingly simple at first glance, but full of complex nuance just below the surface. She had put me in a position where defending my skills would give her a reason to reject me, while down-playing them would also give her a reason to reject me.

I'd researched Megan thoroughly and been lucky enough to discover leadership had parachuted her into this role straight from her work overseeing construction of solutions by the development teams. She'd been incredibly successful building tools, but had little experience in making them useful. I guessed that leadership was testing her with this assignment. This mundane role couldn't be her dream position. She probably viewed it as a way to show that she was the company's next golden child and not some one-hit wonder. My sense was that she was trying to break out of IT and into the business side of the house ... the place where all the advancement, glory and money resided. She seemed experienced enough to know that if she brought me in and I failed as release manager, it would be viewed as a negative on her. And in the hyper-competitive world of director and above, even something as mundane as a bad hire into a key area could be enough to hold you back ... if she were lucky enough to keep her job.

1: Winning the Job

I didn't want her to be threatened by me, but at the same time I wanted her to feel I would have no problem executing the role, and I would present little risk to her career if she hired me. Despite her display of ignorance illustrated through her personal training comment, I didn't need her to know what I knew to succeed. But it was important to her ego that she thought she did. She needed to feel comfortable that I was not a threat to her or her success. And that was her mistake. Managers, who insist they know just as much, if not more than everyone who works for them, are never very effective.

The good news was that people who get parachuted into a situation by leadership almost never have any expectation of having a career in that role. They simply see it as a way to show leadership how good they are at producing results and reinforcing the common mistake weak leadership can make ... namely that a good manager can manage anything, regardless of their background. Once she had reinforced leadership's preconceptions of the world, they would move her to the next crisis and to become their go-to warrior ... at least until she stumbled. Then they would replace her with their next superhero with a cape. To them, she was expendable proof of their superior vision and understanding of the business. After all, they were senior leaders because they possessed those attributes, and anyone whose performance called that into question was clearly substandard and needed to be replaced. Failing to confirm and reinforce that was a sign of a failed superhero, not a gap in leadership assumptions. I'd always found that to be nearly hilarious ... only in a company could the idea flourish that when reality doesn't agree with preconceived assumptions, clearly reality is wrong and will be ignored until it corrects itself and aligns with their assumptions.

1: Winning the Job

I struggled to keep wearing my best poker face and reminded myself that people who become senior leadership have some superb insights that we could all benefit from. So I followed the example of many great leaders by answering the question I wanted to answer, not the one Megan had asked.

Shaking my head slightly, I broke eye contact for a moment and looked up at the ceiling. That was an okay kinesthetic. Looking down would have been a disaster. After a moment of silence to encourage her to think she'd thrown me off balance, I looked straight at her, gave a slightly exaggerated sigh and said, "You know, Megan, it is really very sad. Fortunately, the fact that I am here talking to you makes it clear your company gets it. It is tragic so few companies do."

Her mouth parted slightly, as if to speak, but no words came immediately out. A response that jerked the conversation in a different direction by letting me frame my response from a, "can't win" to a, "can't lose" path was not what she had expected. But I was determined to stand out and show her I could play the interview game as well as any.

I pressed the palms of my hands together in front of my face for a moment, before putting my hands palms-down on the desk and leaning a little closer across the desk. Not close enough to violate her personal space, but just enough to make her feel I was very serious ... that I was sharing a deep insight with her ... that I was giving her a special and perhaps even secret message. I lowered the register and volume of my voice. Slowly shaking my head back and forth I said, "The transition of projects into production is