Exclusive Unconventional Adaptation Story Amidst War Crisis

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When our out-staff team found itself at the epicentre of a global humanitarian crisis, we had to quickly adapt and change our approach to management and product development. While overcoming the routine challenges in multiculturalism and automation, we had to suddenly adapt to an entirely unexpected severe change that threatened the very existence of our business.

1. INTRODUCTION

In my experience report, I will outline my journey as a Senior Technical Program Manager working directly with senior management to adapt to this extraordinary situation as we work with 12 multicultural teams. I’ll start with our routine long-term challenges, then dive into the company’s preparations to gain resilience before the crises. Ultimately, in the main, I’ll cover several steps and experiments we undertook to regain productivity.

This story will show that the principles laid out in the Agile manifesto and the LeSS framework not only work under conventional conditions but are also of great value in crisis situations. Companies may face various challenges, and during a war, even lose people and resources. However, by adhering to these principles will ensure that companies can maintain efficiency and resilience. Even under such difficult conditions the right approach and belief in principles could lead to confidence and success. This story is a reminder of the importance of adaptation and belief in values, even when the world seems shattered.

2. BACKGROUND

My name is Oleksandr Buratynskyi, Business Operations and Agility Producer. I’ve worked in startups (Logistics, BigData, AI, Cinema) and enterprises (Hardware, Fintech) helped to grow, innovate, transform, pivot, pass due diligence, raise money, raise technical/delivery excellence, build guilds, chapters, communities and host/organise hackathons.

When full scale invasion started, I had to face a new level of challenges under threat of extinction and that is what my story will be about confronted.

3. MY STORY

3.1 Challenges Before the War and the Path to Streamlining

It’s sometimes hard to notice the obscurity in internal organisations. Before the war, our challenges were like playing in a sandbox. Money was spent on various toys, but the game didn’t always yield results. The reason was a lack of focus on the customer and a huge gap in communication.

My own entry into the company was prompted by the CTO’s belief in the necessity of a Scrum Master. Having joined a few months before me, he recognized the challenges of a rapidly growing startup and sought an experienced Scrum Master for the role. That’s how he found me, and during our interview, I realised that the company needed to tackle challenges on a higher level and someone who is framework agnostic. We agreed to the role of Agile coach, that I will provide systemic solutions and pick the right framework across the entire organisation, not just one department.
When I joined the team, I was given the green light to Go-See, spot any issues, patterns and return back with a diagnosis. At that point, I set two goals. First, I had to analyse team dynamics, their interactions, and identify areas for improvement. The second goal was to help the company transform QA engineers advance through automation (there was only Manual QA Department at that moment). After initial investigation I already knew that the company would benefit from the most adaptive framework I had practical experience with, so I chose LeSS (Large-Scale Scrum).

I worked with all teams simultaneously: attending daily meetings, engaging with Team Leaders, and participating in weekly C-level alignment syncs. Following discussions with the CTO, engineering and QA managers, I proposed creating a streamlined internal organisation and the idea of dividing the product into areas of responsibility (value streams), but with a single backlog (JIRA) and knowledge repository (Confluence). This was a rather radical idea for teams, and many were reluctant to embrace it. Everyone wanted to build their own results, independent of others, their own flow, have their own Backlog and control their way of working. Unfortunately, this often led to situations where teams were doing unnecessary things that didn’t benefit the business. They also cannibalised the effort of each other doing changes that impact the same metrics in opposite directions. Once there was a case where one team didn’t do what the customer wanted for 3 months and there was a huge scandal when the CEO lost one of the most important contracts. Money was spent, but its impact and significance remained questionable. All these efforts were fruitless, so change was needed more than ever.

I pitched the idea of conducting a value stream for the first time and… Product Managers hated it. They were so conservative and framed with past experiences that no one wanted to hear anything about LeSS and Scrum in its essence.

I was a bit angry and frustrated but my past experience told me that I really should just invest more time, take baby steps and use one very efficient lifehack that I’ve invented – do not tell anybody overused buzzwords. Forget about using words Scrum, LeSS, Agile, Standup, Adaptivity and talk about Goals, Impact and most importantly Money. Executives, top management and Product Managers obsessed with numbers. At the same time many of them just do not think systemically and holistically.

For those of you who don’t know what LeSS is about – it is a Large Enterprise Scaled Scrum solution that allows you to be agile not only name yourself agile on a scale.

It has a pretty straightforward explanation on the less.works website, ground rules and differences between LeSS and a version for bigger organisations - LeSS Huge clarified.

For example, here’s set of rules on how the structure should look like:
- Structure the organisation using real teams as the basic organisational building block.
- Each team is (1) self-managing, (2) cross-functional, (3) co-located, and (4) long-lived.
- The teams are customer-focused feature teams.
- Scrum Masters are responsible for a well-working LeSS adoption. Their focus is towards the Teams, Product Owner, organisation, and development practices. A Scrum Master does not focus on just one team but on the overall organisational system.
- A Scrum Master is a dedicated full-time role.
- One Scrum Master can serve 1-3 teams.
- In LeSS, managers are optional, but if managers do exist their role is likely to change. Their focus shifts from managing the day-to-day product work to improving the value delivering capability of the product development system.
- Managers’ role is to improve the product development system by practising Go See, encouraging Stop & Fix, and “experiments over conformance.”
- For the product group, establish the complete LeSS structure “at the start”; this is vital for a LeSS adoption.
- For the larger organisation beyond the product group, adopt LeSS evolutionarily using Go and See to create an organisation where experimentation and improvement is the norm.

So, I started my journey with Product Managers, redefining their role, changing mindset, digging deeper into their fear of letting go of a command-and-control style of management and it actually took me 6 months of smart communication before the CPO came back to me and said “Hey, Alex, I have a request
for you. We should organise work in value streams!” (he was thinking it was his idea and it’s totally fine for me as long as the company gets to the next level).

With the product managers ready, we collaborated to build the ICP and set up an organisational structure. However, these steps alone didn’t yield sufficient changes. Different departments lacked a shared understanding of customer needs. The more I spoke with various teams, the clearer the communication problem became. We recognized the need to transform the overall communication culture, sometimes through unconventional methods. At the next C-level meeting, I emphasised the importance of direct communication between the development team and end users, facing scepticism from some who deemed it impossible.

I then tried to connect with the sales team, but time zone differences and heavy workloads made access difficult. Looking for an alternative, I noticed that some members of the Ukrainian development team were actively learning English. I suggested establishing a speaking club, where native speakers from the sales team could interact with Ukrainian developers. The focus was on discussing our customers.

The CTO supported this idea, and we organised a meeting where sales managers and engineers finally began to understand each other regarding our clients’ needs and interests. This initial meeting sparked a series of successful interactions. Once the development team understood their ideal customer, they began to focus on meeting the customer’s needs instead of solely performing the technical tasks they were skilled at.

At the same time, I was staying up late to educate our sales managers in the US about how R&D works and what processes should be aligned. I spent hours discussing the right format and, in the end, it was included as a critical part of “Sales 101” bootcamp which was done for 15-20 people each 2 months because of rapid growth.

Despite …. We had these problems.

3.2 Cultural Context

We started creating work streams and combined them into a single backlog, allowing us to distribute tasks more effectively among teams. Initially, there were 6 teams, but later we expanded to 12, also hiring additional Scrum masters. I took a lead and insisted on having new Scrum Masters found in cultural contexts that we’re hiring teams. It was challenging to integrate teams from India, as their core values differed from ours. They had their own approaches and principles, which didn’t always align with ours. Therefore, they needed more overseeing activities than we had before.

Me and the engineering manager were on the same page that we wouldn’t create a separate team from India but should instead integrate Indian developers into existing teams. It was perfectly aligned with LeSS principles of sharing context, common codebase and collaborative enhancement of architecture (instead of having separate departments).

I reached out to team leads and we agreed that it would be the leads’ responsibility to assess and compare the performance of these members before and after joining the teams. They had a three-month onboarding plan, including key OKRs: communication, skill, expertise, product knowledge and innovation. A challenge arose as even engineers with years of experience knew little about customers, made poor hypotheses, and struggled to communicate with product managers. Within two weeks, we had to bid farewell to the first of the 18 developers. But those who remained showed promising results.

This experience gave me valuable insight. Typically, a company spends a significant amount of money on training and onboarding a person for weeks. However, as a start-up with no time to waste, we stressed that developers must start coding from day one, right after communicating expectations and OKRs from their team leaders. So with HRs I’ve worked on onboarding and OKR setting to build self-enhancing loops that will allow people to improve overall performance while they are still learning.

We also implemented my own invention - metric, which helped directors trust the numbers and understand the situation. I call it “Predictability” This metric was results-oriented and helped improve communication between PMs and Engineers.

The formula is quite simple: take average of difference of committed vs completed story points for last 3 Sprints of 1 team (doesn’t matter if the team overcommitting or undercommitting) and get this percentage of “How accurate this particular team is making forecasts?”.
It is all that is needed to build trust with all stakeholders and gives the team the ability to self-organise without micromanagement and getting hands into field processes by top management.

That’s how we build trust and people started to behave more courageous and active, participating in more and more work activities, and being proactive.

This case also highlighted the impactful results that can stem from seemingly minor details. In our effort to foster transparent communication, I also introduced a template for outlining sprint goals. It’s an essential and often overlooked detail that changes people’s mindset for good. This led teams to openly share the hypotheses they tested and the overall results in general chats. As a result, not only did all employees have visibility into the work being done, but leaders, including the CEO, CPO, and CMO, were also able to witness the outcomes achieved by the team and provide their feedback openly.

The formula of proper Sprint Goal looks like a bet:

“Changing X in Y for user U we’ll increase/decrease *Metric* to NN%”

Example: Changing letter type to LT8 for our job seekers we’ll increase revenue of the email channel by 3%. In the description there can be more details about forecast.

It’s also crucial to have a single shared Slack, Teams or Discord channel instead of multiple closed chats. This ensures that the entire team is on the same page, working towards common goals that they Share (everyone can provide feedback seeing Goal and forecast), and understanding how their efforts influence key metrics.

I’ve also introduced the role of Engineering Manager and executed a 6-month acceleration program for Team Leaders to become servant leaders using the Leadership Circle framework.

4 of them were promoted to Engineering Managers managing tech processes per Stream.

Together we introduced CI/CD for everyone, team by team.

3.3 Preparation for Crisis and Readiness

Four months before the invasion, rumours started to escalate. We already had 12 multicultural R&D teams from the USA, Ukraine, and India. I worked directly with senior management—the CTO, VP of engineering, engineering managers — and we agreed to cover the basic needs: communication and financial support. When the first signs of invasion came, our team was already more prepared than ever. This preparation began long before the full-scale war and became a crucial factor in our ability to respond effectively to the crisis.

We chose Signal as our backup messenger due to its security and the ability to connect even with low-quality networks. We also prepared a step-by-step guide on how to set up Payoneer for transferring additional funds in case of a banking system collapse due to Russian cyber-attacks.

When the invasion began, we quickly sent a message with one task for our employees — to move to a safe place. The company allowed people to make any adaptive decisions depending on their situation.

One person managed to escape from the occupation by giving their work laptop to an enemy soldier. I was on a call with him at that moment. The US part of the office initiated a crowdfunding campaign, raised money, and distributed it among all Ukrainian employees in case they had little with them or lost everything in a hurry to leave their apartments.

In the following days, we operated in this mode: when you are safe, you can connect and work on tasks. We switched to a Kanban mode in every value stream. Since we were divided into streams already and had LeSS Huge structure and one backlog per stream, it allowed us to focus, and people got used to taking tasks from other teams. Our prior work to make teams adaptable paid off. People who wanted to be helpful came to us asking for work to clear their minds and earn money to donate most of it to volunteers. We did everything possible to support our employees financially and psychologically, showing that the company would not abandon its people. Personally, me and my SMs gathered additional supportive “Safe checks” – group meetings where everyone was sharing where they are, how are they today and what they’re planning next – move to shelter or transfer relatives to safety. Also, people were able to request any type of help that was needed. We hosted those “Safe checks” each day in the morning.
The most important thing was building trust. We started actively communicating with employees, providing them with current information, and listening to their fears. The main message was that we are one big team and will always support each other, even in the hardest times.

This preparation and focus on maintaining trust proved crucial as the crisis escalated. We were ready to act, maintaining unity and focus. Our team felt supported, and this was a key factor in our successes during the toughest challenges.

Right before Christmas I organised an internal Hackathon, made it like a personal project with very little help from others, invited top experts as a jury and the effect was spectacular. Morale and spirit was sky high and I think it influenced a lot.

3.4 Adapting to new challenges

In the fall of 2022, when all of Ukraine plunged into darkness due to Russian shelling of the energy system, we found ourselves in uncharted territory. Working became incredibly challenging, as many of us lacked access to the Internet or the ability to charge our laptops. The blackouts forced businesses to seek alternative energy solutions, underscoring the importance of adaptability and dedication.

How can organisations foster a culture of adaptability and resilience? The key tool that not only works but should be embraced across all levels, starting with executives, is the retrospective. In the military, this is executed on the ground through an After-Action Review, which is a standard procedure that is carried out after operations to see what was done correctly and what was not.

That's what we did too. After each new situation that we had not faced before, like blackouts, we met and decided what to do to prevent it from happening again. The capacity to calmly assess the situation taught us the importance of avoiding panic and seeking solutions in any circumstance.

3.5 Problems

I've started from building an adaptive structure for a fast-growing distributed multi-cultural logistic startup during COVID.

The challenge was to:
- Introduce new roles (Scrum Master, General QA with Automation, Engineering Manager)
- Transform existing Product Managers to Area Product Owners
- Enhance existing org design with LeSS and clearly defined value streams
- Change people’s mindset from fixed to broad and Agile

And faced the biggest humanitarian crisis in Europe since WWII

3.6 Results

We build a LeSS structure that can adapt in toughest situations.

We practised a human oriented approach and got extreme levels of loyalty at times of existential threat. We went from total chaos to a new peak of performance in a week and a half.

We transformed the mindset so people could quickly shift from one task to broader context without losing efficiency facing the most life-threatening existential challenge of our lives.

4. What I Learned

This story shows that the principles laid out in the Agile manifesto and the LeSS framework – like adaptivity, volunteering, alignment, shared responsibility, support, trust and self-organisation not only work under normal conditions but are also of great value in crisis situations. Companies may face various challenges, and during war, even lose people and resources, but adhering to these principles helps maintain efficiency and resilience.

Even in the most difficult conditions, when war is destroying lives and attempting to defeat us, the right approach and belief in principles can lead to confidence and success. This story is a reminder of the importance of adaptation and belief in values, even when the world seems shattered.
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