



Episode 34: Courtney Kissler
Episode Transcription

Mik Kersten (00:06):

Hello, and welcome to the Mik + One podcast where I sit down with industry leaders to discuss the project to product movement. I'm Mik Kersten, founder and CEO of Tasktop and bestselling author of *Project To Product: How To Survive And Thrive In The Age Of Digital Disruption With The Flow Framework*. Today, I'm joined by Courtney Kissler, Chief Technology Officer at online retailer, Zulily. Prior to joining Zulily in January 2021, Courtney served a wide range of roles across many global brands, including VP of Technology at Nike, VP of Retail Technology at Starbucks and VP of Digital Store Technologies at Nordstrom, where she drove a technological transformation essential for outpacing the demands of today's omni-channel consumers. Courtney's passion for learning and for sharing her experiences with our community is just amazing. She covered some key topics such as generative cultures, thinking the wrong ways around tech debt, thinking the right ways about OKRs, and connecting the pursuit of technological outcomes to things that matter to the customer. With that, let's get started.

Mik Kersten (01:14):

Hello everyone. I am here with Courtney Kissler today. Courtney, I think year on year, a lot of us, myself included, are always watching you talk. The first one for me was during the DevOps Enterprise Summit 2014 when I realized, "Wow, this is the way that we should be thinking about metrics and about transformations." And it was actually quite different to me at that point, to what I was actually hearing from others. And you've had this just fascinating and amazing journey being a technology executive at Nordstrom's, Starbucks, Nike, and now at actually Zulily, an e-tailer. So can you just tell us a little bit about, for those of us like myself, who've been watching it from the sidelines and having a chance to talk to you about all your learnings on this journey, the various stages of large enterprises at various phases of transformation, and now at a company that's so innovative and technology forward. So I guess just tell us how you ended up where you are today at Zulily.

Courtney Kissler (02:08):

All right. Thanks Mik, for inviting me to the podcast, I'm super excited to share and talk to you about this topic. So I'll start with my journey. You mentioned 2014, which I consider to be like one of the biggest learning moments in my journey. So, two years prior to that, I was at Nordstrom and we decided to go big on digital, which now sounds like, of course you did. But back then, we really weren't. We were investing in our website twice a year. We were doing releases twice a year. We had outsourced our apps. We really didn't have a digital capability internally. And our board at the time said, we need to go big and we need to invest, which set up a bunch of stuff in motion inside the organization and was when I really started to get exposed to and connected to the DevOps community.

Courtney Kissler (03:18):

It really started in our infrastructure organization. They were kind of trailblazing and doing infrastructure as code and really looking at providing self-service to the developers. So I spent some time learning from them, read *The Phoenix Project*, which I think a lot of people would say was one of the first kind of exposures to DevOps, and then had that opportunity to tell our story at the DevOps Enterprise Summit in 2014. And what was amazing about that experience was getting to meet the broader enterprise community and learning about how much we all share from each other and work together, using each other as sounding boards. We're all facing similar challenges and, not surprising, a lot of them turn into culture challenges. I spent a number of years at Nordstrom focusing on value stream mapping, and how to really create a generative culture that's grounded in learning and focusing on outcomes over output. And a lot of the concepts that our community cares about. And we made a lot of progress.

Courtney Kissler (04:35):



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We actually had a lot of really great momentum and took value streams across most of the technology organization and really started measuring what it took to get value from idea all the way to our customer, whether it was big C customer, little C customer, and started to be very data-driven. So that was exciting. And then I decided to move to Starbucks in an executive technology role leading the retail organization there, which is global POS. So all of the company operated and licensee ecosystem across the globe for Starbucks, which what a difference in kind of what you need to focus on and care about.

Courtney Kissler (05:23):

At Nordstrom, it was all about 'you come into the store or you shop in our digital experiences'. And it was about engagement, experience, really high-end customer service. At Starbucks, people are wanting speed. You've got to be quick. And so I was learning how to apply some of what I had learned at Nordstrom, because a lot of the challenges that we were facing at Starbucks were similar. We had moved to a monthly release cadence, but that was not our cycle time or our lead time. So the team thought release cadence equaled lead time, and they had done a value stream map, but they hadn't really incorporated what I would consider to be kind of the system and the structure to learn from what we had documented through the value stream. So we resurfaced it and ended up finding out that even though we were releasing monthly, our lead time was 84 days. So great thing to understand, right? So it's 84 days, how do we improve and reduce it? So we started doing tiny experiments and we had a run ahead team that would do smaller deployments and got down to 17 days.

Courtney Kissler (06:48):

And so we started to iterate, and I'm a big believer in start small and scale, so we started small, learned from that team and then started to incorporate those learnings into the broader value stream. It's also where I started to implement other tactics that I thought were needed for us to optimize for flow of value, things like WIP limits. So I'm super passionate about the work that the team is doing, it needs to be visible so that we can be helpful as leaders in unblocking or removing impediments to teams being able to do their best work. And so, flow is a huge passion of mine. So I'll start with, let's make the work visible, what's in the way? In some cases, our teams were not getting time and space to work on, we'll call them operational health. So they couldn't do things like instrumentation and observability because they were just delivering features.

Courtney Kissler (08:06):

So break that work down. This is where I love your book and I didn't have it at the time then, but it's like, how do we [crosstalk 00:08:17] But it's like, how do you know? And you really have to start with the capacity required to keep your services healthy. And then you can layer in other work. And then most organizations encourage ideation and innovation, and they should. There's always way more ideas than there is capacity to deliver against those ideas. And so a common theme is business person doesn't matter. The idea generation could come from anywhere. They're like, "I think we should do this. What's it going to cost, technology? Tell me the estimation required for us to deliver this idea." To do that takes capacity and often takes capacity from engineers and architects and product managers and people who are currently committed to other work. So safe space for discovery, but also WIP limit discovery.

Mik Kersten (09:22):

Just to remind me of this client, we were sitting, I think it was on the top floor of building in Portland, where we were saying the only way we can help organizations is to have them assume fixed capacity, because of course all these big ideas that come from above, they don't have a realistic view of it. And they assume that we can just flex it as you would compute on that. Right? So, but please continue.

Courtney Kissler (09:46):



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Yes, and the context matters. So we were working on this huge PLS upgrade and we kept turning the project red and changing the timeline, which is never fun. It's not fun for the team. It's not fun for the stakeholder community. So what we ended up finding out is that we weren't being intentional about the capacity required to commit to that work. And we had some constraints in our team and certain team members were getting context switched. So they would get pulled off to work on an incident or some other discovery activity, and they would deprioritize upgrade. So what we did is we said, "All right, we have fixed capacity." I love that you said that. And if we were to stack rank our priorities as an organization and put our precious capacity against the highest priorities, then what's leftover? Because whatever's leftover should be next up, but not in flight, which is not easy because it requires discipline.

Courtney Kissler (10:59):

You have to be okay with appreciating that there's fixed capacity and okay with articulating the value, really quantifying the value and being intentional about where you put the capacity. So what we did is we took and put the capacity after, some organizations call it keep the lights on, required to operate, whatever you want to call it. That came first, next came the POS upgrade. So all of a sudden we were no longer context switching some of our critical team members and we made progress. We stopped turning the project red, and it was like, these are concepts that most of our community talk about all the time. Make your work visible. Limit WIP, strategically prioritize, minimize context switching, but putting it into practice can be really, really challenging.

Courtney Kissler (12:00):

There's also, I talked about generative culture. There wasn't yet the environment where a team members felt safe to go, "I'm not set up for success. I'm burdened. I have more work than I have capacity to do." Everyone wants to do a great job. So they're just going to figure out how to fit it. In some way, they're going to work extra hours, they're going to work on the weekends, they're going to try to manage it all. And I feel like my role as a leader is really to minimize burden, optimize flow, create a generative culture and psychological safety and make sure teams feel supported. So that was part of the journey that I went on at Starbucks. And then I joined Nike, which was really, really exciting. I was in the digital platform organization there, and Nike went through a bunch of transformation while I was there and I won't talk about all of it, but one of the things that was missing that I was able to introduce after going through kind of first 90 days, and really listening to where the problems were, was value stream mapping.

Courtney Kissler (13:14):

We really didn't understand the flow of value to our customer. So we did some value stream maps across, again, started small. I think I had an 800 person organization at the time, and we took only five teams through the value stream mapping process, because there's a readiness aspect, too. The leaders have to be ready. The teams have to be ready. You got to really have a good system to sustain that kind of continuous improvement mindset. So we did it with five teams, we were able to make a ton of progress on our lead time and our quality metrics. I'm also a big believer in percent complete accurate. We would see that we were asking for information before we really needed it. And it was slowing down the flow of value. So, we did some of that at Nike, also introduced the accelerate and state of DevOps content and metrics, but really focused on, we called it Ship 365.

Courtney Kissler (14:20):

So we had the typical anti-pattern where we would say, "During our peak windows, we are going to shut down all change, and we're going to have freeze windows, and we're going to have committees to review changes." And we really wanted to shift more to, what's keeping us from shipping 365 days a year at any time during the day? Then we can make a business decision about whether or not it's the right time to do it, but we shouldn't be scared to deploy. And what that created was a platform for teams to elevate. "Well,



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I haven't had time to do CI in the right way. I just haven't had the space." And we said, "Okay, well, what might it take for you to get that support?" Or, "I don't have observability across any of the products that I'm working on." "Awesome. What would it take to give you that space?"

Courtney Kissler (15:18):

So that was kind of a good transition that we went through there. And then I decided to join Zulily. And I had talked to Zulily years before and really admired the culture there. I loved the focus on technology as a real ... Frankly, all of the companies I've been at have focused on technology as a strategic enabler. Zulily is a technology company. We build a lot of our technology, which was compelling to me. And it's all about creating a culture of learning, which is super important to me. I really thrive in an environment where learning is at the core of the DNA of the organization. So experimentation, innovation, learning, healthy balance of operational and feature delivery. So it's been great. I'm on month five. So I'm still pretty new to the organization.

Courtney Kissler (16:25):

I went through my first 90 days, because I'm a big believer in that. So lots of listening, lots of taking in what's causing burden in the teams. And not surprising, it goes right back to what you said. The fixed capacity in the organization is not well understood. So how do we make that visible? How do we make that part of our prioritization decisions? OKRs are a huge part of the system at Zulily. We were also introducing them at Nike. I forgot to say that. So we started on our OKR journey when I was there. So adopting a framework to help provide that line of sight to teams so they know that the work they're doing is contributing to something that is strategic and part of our organization's strategic plan. Sorry, lots of words.

Mik Kersten (17:21):

Oh, yeah. I have so many notes. It's well, I'm going to have to rewind just a little bit because there's just, I think so much was there, Courtney. So I just, starting back to, I think what you saw and what you experienced, which is when you started talking about the self-service aspects of it, right. You actually came from network engineering and you somehow got the palpable sense that we've got all these bottlenecks in terms of how development operations communicate. And then you moved on to the fact that I think what you said is so important, is that release frequency is not capacity. It's not the whole value stream. And I think so many leaders there from the lot of people who are trying to impact change, they're seeing these massive bottlenecks on the infrastructure side, they're trying to help bring their organizations to cloud. They're kind of stuck before the stage that you're at.

Mik Kersten (18:08):

So how did you make that transition in terms of actually making sure that your teams, the parts of the organizations that were within sort of your sphere of influence and your sphere of control, that they understood that there was more to these value streams than just shipping code every day and shipping code safely, but that you actually had to have the business understanding of the dynamics of flow, because what I want you to get us to, if you could, is back to this point of the fixed capacity, right? We're going to have to talk about OKRs on this episode, that's been such a hot topic lately and the DevOps Enterprise community. And I'm seeing one of these massive dysfunctions, which is the way that OKR planning is done is completely divorced from any sense of what the actual value streams are, what their capacity is and what could be done.

Mik Kersten (18:54):

So somehow you've been, and I've watched you do this over the years, is educating business leaders. They need to assume fixed capacity while you take it on yourself, of course, to increase that capacity,



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increase that through put, increase that flow velocity. So how did you, how have you had those discussions in your role at, various VP roles at these organizations to help other parts of the business understanding what you saw with your teams and what was bringing them day-to-day?

Courtney Kissler (19:19):

Yeah. Such a great question because I think the shift in mindset at the leadership level is so critical and how organizations think about .. and I don't even like to say IT technology, because if you think about traditional IT organizations or how IT has been part of organizations, it's really been a service provider they're kind of off to the side, maybe order takers, maybe considered a cost center. There's all these kind of attributes of IT. And the shift that we made that I think was critical was opening up transparency to the technology challenges because I think a lot of leaders are like, "Just don't worry about it. Just tell me what you want and I'll deliver against it." But I found that my most meaningful partnerships and progress that we made was when we made things very visible, and I'll give an example.

Courtney Kissler (20:25):

So similar to the web example that I used, when we decided to bring our mobile development back in-house, what we uncovered was again, we were only releasing twice a year for our iPhone app, which is just not okay. And so we did a value stream map to understand like what was contributing to the long lead times. Also because a lot of organizations, and I think this is where DevOps comes in, but if you think about a lot of organizations were structured where you had dev teams and you had production support or operations teams, then you have your infrastructure teams. You had all these silos. QA was another silo. And it was like, "Well, this isn't how we want to be operating." One concept that we introduced with my business partner at Nordstrom was work is work.

Courtney Kissler (21:25):

Because we have fixed capacity, you can't delineate and have like one backlog that's about production and one backlog that's about dev. You really need to have a single backlog. And I want my business partner to see it. So one thing I'm not a fan of, but I understand why some companies go here, is when we go into planning, we're going to carve out 40% of our capacity to do tech debt. It's like, I've yet to see that work. What I've seen work is this is the work that we have that needs to be done. This is the fixed capacity that we have in the team. Business partner, get in it with me and let's make the tough decisions about what is important with the fixed capacity that we have, which includes prioritizing things, like we had a high crash rate. My business partner didn't even know that because it was considered an IT KPI, IT watches crash rates.

Courtney Kissler (22:32):

And I'm like, "No, the company should care about crash rates." She cared, but it had never been made visible to her before. So it was like, make it visible. And then she said, "What work is in our backlog that would reduce our crash rate?" So we moved that above the line. And then we lowered our crash rate. Our star rating in the Apple store was not good. She's like, "What work could we do to improve our star rating?" Well, these five things. Move them above the line. So it took that transparency and really grounding it in the reality of the fixed capacity. Work is work. All the work should be visible and we should have a balanced mechanism for prioritizing the work. It shouldn't just be, is that going to drive revenue? It should also include how are we going to have ... And I mean, you could argue lower crash rates equates to potentially higher revenue because people can complete their purchase.

Courtney Kissler (23:35):

But that was not part of the prioritization framework until she and I kind of started to make it visible. It made people uncomfortable because to that point, we hadn't been as open to kind of what was going on



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behind the scenes and technology. But I think it's important. And I think the lines are blurring. One of my passions and you know this about me, is a lot of the work that we're driving as passionate change agents for transformation and DevOps, we can't do alone. It's not a technology transformation. It is a company transformation. And if your business partners and leaders aren't on board, you'll make limited progress.

Courtney Kissler (24:21):

And so how to open that up and really make it visible and data-driven so that you can make better decisions and then the teams felt supported. So they're like, "We're going to get time to work on these things that have been on our backlog for the last 12 months?" Yes. And we have alignment and it's important and we're going to report on it. We're going to make it visible so people see that these are outcomes that we are going to improve, which at the time we were not calling OKRs, but they really were. They were things that we were trying to improve.

Mik Kersten (24:57):

Yeah, and I think that ... Let's just dive into that tech debt topic, because I think where I see a lot of teams fail as they realize they've got these ... Let's say, let's go back to the crash problem, is that they've taken all these shortcuts to try to get that initial iOS app or some other app to market. And there are piles of tech debt, but when they make the case to the business partner, to the people on the product side, the people working closely with customers, that they need to spend all this time on tech debt, that it's not a case that's in a language or that makes sense. It's not outcome based, right. We just need to work on tech debt. We just need to fix the architecture. So the approach that I know is, and this, of course, the whole approach of the flow framework is that everything, every single investment that you're making and your value streams actually drive some kind of business outcomes.

Mik Kersten (25:43):

So I think that's ... Lower crash rate is a perfect example. If you can now make the case for lowering the crash rate through fixing some of these major problems or taking on some SDKs, you shouldn't have touched at that point or some API they shouldn't be using, and actually make the case with lowering the crash rate with a tech debt investment, again, you're making an economic case. Just the same way as you know you need to probably accelerate the velocity of some cool features to get the star rating up. And again, it's about making that case for investing in some kind of flow, whether it be features or debt reduction, but making the economic case. So how are you doing this? Are you doing it yourself? Are you empowering your teams to again, to make a case that's outcome based for, and I do actually want to, there's an interesting nuance here that where I see people struggle with before you said big C customers versus little C customer, right?

Mik Kersten (26:36):

Sometimes these investments are even less directly relevant to the iOS app store because you need to invest in some customer data or pipeline in support of that. So how do you help your teams make that case? Where again, I think we all know what we want to do is we want to create a better experience for the customer, for the business. And so often what happens is people will bring as part of planning this, we need to spend 40% of the next 12 months on technical debt. And of course that falls on deaf ears.

Courtney Kissler (27:08):

Yeah. I think it does. And often the reality during your kind of once you've done your planning process, if you validate at the end, I would say strongly that I could guess it never equated to 40% anyway.

Mik Kersten (27:29):

Right.



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Courtney Kissler (27:30):

So, it often gets deprioritized, even if you try that. So one thing that I've been trying to do, and it's funny, I literally just had this conversation this morning. I don't even want to call it tech debt. I think tech debt is overplayed. I think it lends itself to this immediate, that's a technology problem. And someone that I worked with at Nike, he's actually part of our forum community said, "The second you ship to production, it's tech debt." The day you deploy, because you basically have just ... You should be investing in your underlying technology components always, so you don't end up in a scenario where you've got this huge backlog of things that require ... I used to, I've heard it called different things at different companies.

Courtney Kissler (28:24):

One is modernization. Let's do a modernization initiative and we'll fund it and then we'll do a bunch of modernization and it's like, "Okay. Or you could connect it to a business outcome," because often, and I'll give an example. One area that I've seen that often gets underinvested in, but is critical to the experience for your customer is supply chain. It's like, "Oh, it's back of the house supply chain." Some retailers have recognized supply chain is critical, but not all. And often it hasn't been a focus for investment, but if you can take it and say, "If we build a supply chain platform that can enable experiences that our customer cares about," so one thing that I think all customers care about is, "Set my expectations on when my order is going to arrive and then manage my expectations accordingly. So make your promise, keep your promise, or tell me if you need to adjust the promise."

Courtney Kissler (29:40):

Feels like basics, but there's a whole supply chain ecosystem that informs that promise that if it's not being invested in, it's going to break down for the customer. So connecting that, and again, this goes back to value stream. If you consider, what does it take for us as an organization to commit to our customer and accuracy of when to expect their order, you will see really quickly where you might have, and you could still call it tech debt, where you require investment to improve that ... I mean, I consider that to be a business outcome because where it shows up is NPS or, I mean, you can see it show up in, someone may cancel their order because you haven't done it well. So you can connect it to something that matters. But you need to, because if you just say like, say there's a constraint in the supply chain technology, like we do batching of our inventory availability.

Courtney Kissler (30:52):

So once a day we can tell the customer what's really available. Well, it's probably going to lend itself to a less than accurate promise to your customer. Well, maybe that's because you haven't architected it in a way to do real time. Some may call that tech debt. I would call it tech investment and enablement of accuracy to your customer and expectation management and keeping your commitment. I don't know that that is an example, but I feel like that's where things break down a little bit and you can really even take that all the way to, if you still have infrastructure investments required. So maybe you haven't moved everything to the cloud yet, and that becomes an enabler, but it's seen as if you have things on prem, it's tech debt. Well maybe not. Maybe the reason that you have it on on-prem is a different driver, but moving it to the cloud is going to unlock a business outcome.

Mik Kersten (31:54):

I really like how you're always looking at better ways to connect it to something that matters to the business, to the customer, right? Because I think the, again, where people get so frustrated with these arguments falling on deaf ears, it's I do see a similar pattern of what you're seeing, right? Which is that investing in the core platforms, investing in better supply chain management and software and all of those



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things, they're one or two steps divorced from some of the key results or KPIs that we might be tracking at the business level because they require additional investment before they actually drive up NPS.

Mik Kersten (32:28):

So the way, and tell me what you think of this, the way that I've been having, I think at least a little bit of success in helping some technology and business leaders understand this is, is to actually to understand what are the leading indicators of success and in terms of those outcomes and then how to track those, and then of course, how you're tracking it until you're actually getting to that outcome, because of course technical debt investment and the flow framework elevates the concept of debt, not just technical debt, but actual debt in process and the new organizational structures and the way that we've got, basically have these disconnected silos. These are just all the various forms of debt between our software architecture, our organizational structure and the processes that we have in place. But technical debt investment's never visible to a customer. A customer should never care, right? All they care about is how often the app crashed and whether they had a great experience and fundamentally we care about how they rated it and how it drove those business outcomes.

Mik Kersten (33:24):

So I love how you're always, again, relating to these, all of the technology and investment. And I think, again, such a key part of your thinking is that it is a continuous investment. We don't have a tech debt release, right. Well, I know what we do at Tasktop of course is every single release has some portion of debt reduction. And that debt reduction is just investment in improving technology to improve flow for the next release cycle. And that's it. And if it didn't improve flow in the next release cycle, well, we did something wrong and maybe maybe that refactoring was not as ... or that API was not as useful as we envisioned. So again, tell me, because I think, you and I both are starting to do the same thing. What we want to do is provide these leading indicators that will actually, first of all, have that hypothesis of how we can drive those outcomes, something that's meaningful to the customer and to the company.

Mik Kersten (34:14):

And of course, I think you and I are both trying to make OKRs be some of that, be that bridge between the business strategy, the plan, the business outcomes, and then what we need to do within technology to deliver on those where it's not these big bangs, it's more, this continuous learning and improvement and the experimentation. So how have you been, and of course, then I just want to really quickly relate the fact that I often see OKRs as just completely misused, basically driving even more work in progress on teams, by escalating additional features and additional major initiatives around cloud and the rest, and actually not giving any of that room for learning and improvement and the space for a generative culture. So how are you not messing up the OKR stuff?

Courtney Kissler (35:02):

Well, I definitely do not have it all figured out. I can share the things that I think are super important when it comes to practicing and adopting OKRs. One is, and you said this, you have to have a structure and a system to really learn, and you said look at those leading indicators and make any adjustments required. I think a lot of companies will set up and I use my air quotes OKRs, and then they have no system. Sometimes I call it system of accountability, not always popular, but just how are you inspecting and understanding that the work you're doing is really improving that OKR in the right way. And if not, what's your mechanism for adjusting what you're working on so that it does improve the OKR. So I think that's one. Absent the system, I feel like OKRs are meaningless. I also have seen, even though this is out there in the industry, you can't have 50 of them.



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Mik Kersten (36:20):
Yeah.

Courtney Kissler (36:21):
You have to keep ... I think that's what the five and three are. There's a bunch of guidance, but don't have too many. And that's not to say, because one thing I've learned when I'm introducing OKR to a team is, "Well, we can't just care about those five things." And it's like, "No, that's not what OKRs are intended for." We will still have KPIs. We have to have those indicators that we're looking at in a balanced view, OKRs, it's not an or, it's an and, but being very intentional about the use of those. And then also it takes discipline, which I think sometimes organizations equate discipline to bureaucracy or administrative overhead versus some amount of discipline enables agility. It really sets you up to be able to move at the pace that you need to move at and make sure that you have confidence that your teams have line of sight to what they're delivering. and you have your capacity lined up to the things that matter.

Courtney Kissler (37:33):
I think the structure matters a lot, the system. What we're using at Zulily, which I think is great. We have a weekly business review where we're looking at those leading indicators and we're making decisions about what we might need to do differently. Not in a, I think you could end up in a scenario where you're whiplashing in the organization. So it's like learn from the leading indicators, but be thoughtful about adjusting the OKR plan, because we don't want to just continue to context switch and move people working on things that you got to give it some time is what I'm trying to say.

Courtney Kissler (38:15):
And then having that feedback loop where it's like, "Yes, we intended this to reduce the crash rate. We need to learn for the next four to six weeks, whether or not it did." So give the time and space, have the structure to look at the data. Leaders need to be engaged, because one thing I've found is that leaders will get excited about OKRs and then they'll delegate it into the organization, versus really being, checking in enough to signal that it's important and providing support if the team needs to make a tough trade-off or a decision that we need to work on something different. So I think that's all important.

Courtney Kissler (39:06):
I still think it's hard to see when you have an OKR that might require multiple teams to contribute to it, which is I think a valid use case in most organizations. How are you really understanding what is contributing to the improvement or not of that OKR in an environment where you might have more than one team doing work that's intended to improve it. So one thing that we're going to introduce that we haven't had, because we have teams reporting on OKRs in what we call our communities. So we have community monthly business reviews. We don't have a cross community OKR conversation. So we're going to introduce that into the system so that we can have a more meaningful conversation across teams. So I don't know if that answers your question, but that's some of what I've seen.

Mik Kersten (40:12):
It does. I think it's really helpful in just triangulating with the rest of what you've said, is that these key results like reducing crash rates. The failure mode I see, by the way, much as again, we all love investing in technology and reducing technical debt, it's when I've seen that set as an OKR, I find that disturbing because again, you're sort of disconnecting outcomes from basically business and customer. Whereas reducing the crash rate, everyone can figure out how to take that and actually then apply some of their own knowledge but have the teams be autonomous on determining how to deliver on that work, deliver on that ... Like you said, work is work, and deliver on that outcome of reducing the crash rate or improving the star rating. That's another great one, right?



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Mik Kersten (40:56):

You might actually need to, people will give you very bad ratings if you've got a supply chain problem, that means they're thinking two weeks late, right. Or maybe not. Two weeks might be an exaggeration at this point, but with the Suez Canal, it hasn't been actually. So we see that flow problems can cause two week delays very easily, but I think so aligning around them, I think that's a really good point. The thing I wanted to touch on and get your thoughts on is these cross community, cross value stream, cross tribe, however organizations are structured, cross-program OKRs I've been finding to be super interesting, right? I think within your communities and doing those business on a monthly and quarterly basis can really help everyone prioritize, if they all know that they're after better NPS or better active usage, better retention or something of that sort.

Mik Kersten (41:43):

The thing I've noticed, that's been really interesting in the cross community ones, the cross-program ones is still having OKRs that actually help promote learning and improvement, which is obviously something that you and I are very passionate about. And so for example, the one that I know is working for us, we used to have ages ago a flow time reduction. So just basically from working entered to exiting the value stream, improving that across all of our value streams, because it gets people thinking of the right ways around self-service and cloud platforms and the role of SREs and the split between the operational responsibilities within a particular product value stream, versus in the platform value streams and the like.

Mik Kersten (42:25):

So one thing I've actually noticed is that having a cross-community, cross-program flow efficiency metric, let's say, where everyone is looking at for their particular set of teams, how improve their flow efficiency. But of course the challenge that we all have is those dependencies, or is dependencies on underinvestment common things like supply chain or pipelines or analytics, or customer, customer reviews and data management and the like. So how are you thinking about ... Do you see, I guess OKRs as an opportunity to inject that kind of learning that you've been driving across these companies and the amazing things that you've delivered to them of systematizing some of that, because I could see them as a useful tool for that, so.

Courtney Kissler (43:08):

I agree, and it creates the opportunity to really build that internal capability around learning. Because what I've seen happen is people will get excited about value streams, flow. No one will dispute, we want to optimize the flow of value to our customer. But what will end up happening often, is behaviors and actions are not always creating that environment and not bad intent. It's just, it's a new learning and behavior change for a lot of leaders, especially. And so having something that creates, I would say, just like a platform to focus on learning, I think it creates that, again, I'll say like that accountability across the board where it's like, how are we improving flow?

Mik Kersten (44:15):

And then, I think we're always careful with the word accountability, but I'll give you an example of where it did exactly this, where a set of teams was just too busy. Which it's hard to ... There's always a set of teams that's going to be too busy, but because there's accountability, in this case, in our organization around flow efficiency, everyone's responsible every single quarter to create a set of experiments or monthly, ideally, for increasing their flow and reducing their burden and this team didn't. And so, they were, and of course they want to, but actually introducing accountability for learning, it's just this, I think it's this interesting reframe that I think again, where we can use OKRs to kind of help our teams help themselves, so.



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Courtney Kissler (44:58):

Agree. And I think it, if done in a generative, psychologically safe way, it's a version of, so the team that didn't, they're essentially asking for help.

Mik Kersten (45:12):

Yes.

Courtney Kissler (45:13):

So it should be an indication for leaders to say, "What help do you need?" How might we problem solve with that team to then help them optimize next, versus where I've seen it break down is the, almost like the competitive nature of it where it's like, competition can be good, but it can also not be good where people are feeling almost ashamed that they're not getting the same results as another team. And this is where I also think leaders have to accept that it's team specific.

Mik Kersten (45:50):

Yeah.

Courtney Kissler (45:51):

You really have to understand the team dynamic in order for it to be a meaningful learning opportunity. And so how leaders engage is so important to create that environment so that teams can continuously learn and improve.

Mik Kersten (46:09):

I could not agree more. Courtney, thank you so much. That was so awesome. Is there any, anything we've missed? Any last words I've got about 20 more questions for you that we'll have [inaudible 00:46:19]

Courtney Kissler (46:20):

I don't think so. I just think I'm so happy that as an industry, we're on this journey and we're trying to help organizations be better. I think it just makes me feel always supported. We're all kind of in this together, we're learning from each other. I just think there's so much opportunity for us just to continue to drive for the right outcomes that end up being better for people, because at the end of the day, it's about people. And so I just thank you for inviting me and it's always great to catch up with you.

Mik Kersten (46:59):

Okay. Thank you. And thank you so much for all those contributions to our collective learnings and, yeah, I encourage you just to keep rewatching Courtney's videos from the conference. I always pick something new up, but thanks so much, Courtney.

Courtney Kissler (47:11):

Thank you.

Mik Kersten (47:17):

A huge thank you to Courtney for joining me on this episode. For more following my journey on LinkedIn, Twitter, or using #MikPlusOne or #ProjectToProduct. You can reach out to Courtney on Twitter @chawklady or via LinkedIn. I have a new episode every two weeks so hit subscribe to join us again. You can also search for "Project to Product" to get the book, and remember that all author proceeds go to supporting women and minorities in technology. Thanks, and until next time!"



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A huge thank you to Courtney for joining me on this episode. For more following my journey on LinkedIn, Twitter, or using a hashtag MikPlusOne or Project to Product, you can reach out to Courtney on Twitter @chalklady or via LinkedIn. I have a new episode every two weeks. So hit subscribe to join us again. You can also search for Project to Product, we've got the book. You