

Building Successful Teams with Helen Pownall

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Speaker 1: Tech Reimagined. Redefining the relationship between people and technology. Brought to you by Endava. This is Tech Reimagined.

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Bradley Howard: Hello and welcome back to Tech Reimagined, Endava's podcast. I'm Bradley Howard and I'm very pleased to welcome you to the latest episode of our show. In season three, we're looking at how technology is influencing the fabric of our society, the way we work, the way we live and the way that we do business. Stay tuned on every podcast platform to listen to our subject matter experts this season.

Speaking of subject matter experts, today we have the pleasure of hosting Helen Pownall, Engineering Program Director at Sportradar. Hello, Helen. Thanks very much for joining us today. Can you give us a bit of background into you and also Sportradar?

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Helen Pownall: Yeah, sure. I'm the engineering program director at Sportradar. I look after the product delivery processes and program managers who look after lots of the large programs that get carried out at Sportradar.

In my group, we include the agile coaches, the program managers, team called Operational Excellence, which they're all about sort of KPIs, metrics and ways of working and also the team called Integration and Evolution, who focus on bringing new mergers and acquisitions, bringing new teams into Sportradar and setting them up with their productivity and making sure that they can actually communicate and collaborate when they join us.

I've been at Sportradar for about three and a half years, and Sportradar's tagline is Reimagining Immersive Experiences for Sports Fans and Betters. Essentially, what we do is we enhance the way the world experiences sport, which means that we use data, media, live streaming feeds, for example, and then we bring it together and analyze it to provide products and services relating to engaging with sports. For example, for many household names that you'll think about in terms of the sporting life, Google International Tennis Federation, NBA, NHL, Bundesliga, these are the few of the names that rely on Sportradar. So that's us.

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Bradley Howard: Thanks for that intro. Welcome to the show.

For today's episode, we'd love to hear your opinion on how to build successful teams. So a bit of background, so today's organizations needs to tick a lot of boxes that were once focused around subject matter expertise and revenue and other hard metrics. But now it's all about company culture, diversity, inclusion, things that span beyond the skill set of industry expertise and hard metrics. Based on your experience, what do you think are the most important qualities that makes companies and macro teams so successful?

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Helen Pownall: I think it means you'd have to know what success means for you and for your company. I think one of the key things here is having an authentic mission statement or a view on your culture and values, which resonates with the people who are

in that company so that you as a person who are listening to that mission statement, you can see, you can envisage how you're part of the process and how your job fits into that overall mission. You have a direct line of sight to, "Okay, so if I do this, I know I'm going to be able to help my company achieve that mission." It comes back down to that whole, "Yeah, what are we here to do? I'm here to put a man on the moon" and that's exactly, I think, where people need to focus.

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Bradley Howard: You talked about how you integrate some of the teams that come from mergers and acquisitions. When you integrate the members with your team, how do you help them with the cultural differences? I mean, every M&A tries to align its own company culture, but there's always going to be invariably some differences. How do you try and encourage people to take on the new Sportradar culture?

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Helen Pownall: A few years ago when I joined, one of the first things I did was to lead a transformation initiative to adopt the Spotify model. The good thing about having done that is that we basically set up a kind of lingua franca of, "Okay, so here's how we're structured. This is the role, these are the roles, and this is what each particular role normally does" without being too prescriptive. So we have squads, we have a relatively clear, straightforward and relatively industry-standard definition.

Part of what helps understand the culture is also just understanding "What are the building blocks and what are the key roles and how do I fit in?" What we normally do is we normally talk to the teams as they come in and then try to understand what they're doing today and try and map it to, "Okay, so you normally coordinate and orchestrate kind of stuff. Have you considered in Sportradar you'd be potentially aligning to this kind of role, for example?" So we try to make sure that from a basic kind of, "Where do I fit in the organization," that's kind of step one in the overall transformation.

The cultural piece, it does take much, much longer, but we find that what we can do at the very beginning is to actually put people into the same consistent structure as the rest of the company so that at least when you say to somebody, "Oh, okay, I need to go and find the person who's responsible for X," at least the people who are trying to engage with this new part of the organization will at least know, "Okay, so in this particular part of the organization that is this person."

It's a very small step, it's a very basic step that you need to take. Then over time, over months, you then build in some of the more complicated or some of the more in-depth cultural aspects of the ways of working and one of our principles, all these kinds of things.

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Bradley Howard: Do you have that documented when the company is coming through an M&A so that it's really clear for people to understand that there's no ambiguity? Is that the point?

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Helen Pownall: Exactly. When we went through the original transformation going to the tribes, squads model, that prompted us to have to make sure that we documented our principles, documented our terminology, documented our roles. So what we do then is we sort of "That's there." It's a package for people to access as soon as they arrive.

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Bradley Howard: What size was Sportradar when you started working on that? Because I know at Endava, we did something very similar when we were circa 750,000 people where we had to start describing on paper the equivalent to make it really clear how our organization was going to operate.

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Helen Pownall: From an engineering perspective, yeah, when we were going through this, it was about a thousand, it was about a thousand engineers. Obviously, Sportradar, we've got about three and a half thousand people, but not all of them are in the product delivery units. We have the sales, commercial, operational. But in terms of product delivery, yeah, we had about a thousand people going through that transformation.

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Bradley Howard: When it becomes inefficient to sit down with everyone.

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Helen Pownall: Yes, exactly, which then prompts you to have to go through and just say, "Let's formalize this. Let's make sure that we've got at least some kind of written record of what the approach is."

Which is not to say that we are completely dogmatic and prescriptive, but what we're saying is, "This is where we start." If you find yourself doing X, Y and Z, which is not included, that's not a bad thing, but it just means that you are then able to have that conversation that says, "Hey, I'm an agile coach and I'm an agile coach. We normally do this, I'm doing X, Y and Z. Can we just recognize that this is not part of the normal, or this is not part of my standards, or where I want to grow my career?" Or it might be, but at least just recognizing where the differences are.

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Bradley Howard: Do you have any other specific examples of initiatives from either Sportradar or other companies that you've seen or maybe previous companies that you've worked at that kind of have that step change in company culture?

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Helen Pownall: Well, I've done a similar thing in Worldpay reflecting on both of those transformations. I would say that not only, I mean, I've talked a lot about what it means in terms of the structure of the way people have organized, which is, obviously, the thing that you can see on an org chart what's the key difference, first of all.

But I think the most important thing to actually consider with these Spotify, these agile mindset-type transformations it's not really what the organization and the structure looks like, but it's just how people approach their work and how people work as a team, how we solve problems as close to the context of the problem as possible. You're trying to move away from that command-and-control structure, that command-and-control hierarchy towards a much more federated decision-making structure.

That's what, in terms of both of the times I've seen a Spotify transformation working well, that has been the thing that's really unlocked a lot, the productivity and the step change and also then help the cultural aspects of it when you've got people, engineers and product folks working in partnership within a team.

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Bradley Howard: That's the key, isn't it? You've got to get your engineering teams working really closely with the product teams as well.

Thinking of the phrase teamwork makes the dream work, what do you think are the essential qualities in building teams for digital acceleration and technical programs?

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Helen Pownall: People, obviously, at the heart of absolutely everything, you need the people with the right skills and the right attitude. I would say attitude actually comes first because then if you've got the attitude, you can learn the skills.

Purpose and mission, they need to know what they're doing.

Diversity is important because to be able to make a strong product, I mean, I'm really, obviously, thinking about product delivery here. You want to have a safe place where you can talk about, "Well, let's discuss how it could go wrong." The diversity of thought and the range of opinions and perspectives you can use at that point in the time when you're starting off that product delivery really strengthens the overall outcome. If you've got eight people all looking at things in the same way, then they're likely to miss a lot of things.

Tooling is important. If you've got the tools that allow you to do a lot of things without lots of manual intervention, then, obviously, people are going to be working more effectively.

Also access to stakeholders, I think. That's the one thing that you need to make sure that... Access to stakeholders, but then getting out of the way, not too much access, not too much intervention.

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Bradley Howard: You mentioned attitudes in there at the beginning. How do you seek out someone's attitude in a new job interview, for example?

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Helen Pownall: I've got a couple of questions I tend to ask. One question I ask a lot is, "Think about when you know were coming home from work and you were absolutely thrilled about what you'd just done for that day. Can you tell me about that day?" That is often really revealing about what that person's motivations are. Sometimes they'll say, "Well, I managed to hold this workshop and it was a lot of planning." So you can see what drives people and what makes people really happy and what they do. For me, the magic wand question is that one.

But, of course, when you're interviewing people you do want to find out the competencies. So it's a classics of putting people into scenarios and saying, "Well, how did you do that? Why did you do that? What was the reason to do that?" Just probing, probing, probing.

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Bradley Howard: Well, to anyone who's about to be interviewed by Helen Pownall at Sportradar, if they listen to this podcast to do some research, then they've probably earned their time back, the step they need, for sure.

In technical solutions and product development, would you say that having a smaller, more specialized team is better than a large set of teams? How do you manage that balance?

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Helen Pownall: This is a really tricky question. I mean, at Sportradar, we use a system called flight levels. It's, essentially, what we try to do is we try to have a set of coordination that operates at different scales depending on the kind of undertaking that is being attempted.

The basic unit of delivery in the Spotify model is the squad so that is your small specialized team and actually is the more you can let them crack on with what they want to do and leave them alone without dependencies and without interruptions, the better. But, obviously, as you scale and the more ambitious programs you want to undertake, that requires more coordination and facilitation across a wider range of diverse skills. So we tend to use flight levels to coordinate across tribes, across squads, and then across verticals to be able to actually align what the outcomes are across all those different orders of magnitude.

Essentially, what that means is that when you're thinking about a squad, I mean a squad will set up what they want to do for that particular increment or that particular iteration and they will set up what they want to do. They will agree what definition of done is, and then they'll run through that iteration and then conclude it and have a retro, typically, the plan, do, check, act cycle.

We essentially run that kind of cycle at different scales depending on what we're undertaking. Obviously, we won't run it at a program level if someone is just fixing a bug, but if we have a giant program which requires seven tribes, yes, we will have that. Okay, so what is it that we're going to be doing? What's the success criteria? Let's run through this cycle. Obviously, the cycle is a lot longer, it can be a lot longer. We have that in 11 days. But the cycle is a lot longer typically for the large programs that work across tribes and across verticals. Then we'll get together at the end and we'll say, "Okay, so how do we achieve our goals?" So that level of coordination and variable levels of coordination, those systems really work effectively for us at Sportradar.

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Bradley Howard: For those IT programs that are just really challenging, really difficult to work with, lots of legacy technology in there as well, all during just tougher environmental challenges like COVID, for example, what do you do to try and help morale within the teams and keep productivity really high?

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Helen Pownall: One of the key things that we try to focus on is the amount of work in process that the teams are expected to cater for. I think it goes for COVID situations, it goes for legacy technologies, it goes for big.... So in order to be able to focus on one thing and just getting it done and getting it done, done, getting it absolutely to the end, you absolutely need to ruthlessly prioritize.

In order to be able to ruthlessly prioritize, you must have a very clear mission and strategy. So again, it comes back down to what we were talking about at the beginning of the meeting, which is what is the mission, what is the strategy and how are you going to achieve that and how are you going to make sure that the teams are only working on just enough scope to achieve the next increment?

Of course, during COVID we had sort of the pop quiz things going on every so often. But then you'd kind of be sitting on Zoom meetings and then you'd be having another

Zoom meeting with the drink in hand. So in the end then we graduated towards walking meetings and things like that. So you just have to be creative.

I think actually we went from being pretty much flexi working, but with a very strong bias towards being in the office to pretty much fully remote within the course of four weeks. Now we're just coming, we're just unpicking that now. I think a lot of people actually appreciate the flexibility that that has given us, but you need to be creative, you need to be creative with your collaboration tooling, but then you need to make sure that there's some boundaries around it.

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Bradley Howard: Yeah. I think our general view is that you can have pop quizzes and all different other extracurricular initiatives on top of the work. If the work is super interesting and, like you say, the tooling is good, then that is what most people in IT really relish. That's what they really want to work on, interesting, challenging projects and they have the right tools to do it. But as soon as you try and have a really boring project that's super high pressure using old technology, the tooling isn't particularly great and then you do pop quizzes, well, that's just not going to work, really, isn't going to make anyone excited.

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Helen Pownall: Yeah.

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Bradley Howard: I just want to go back to mergers and acquisitions one last time. When you have finished a new M&A activity, what's the first thing that you all tend to look at? You look at people, the process or technology?

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Helen Pownall: People. We have a way of tracking what we're doing as we're going through the process. Obviously, during the process we make sure that the security, because one of the first things we have to do is secure, get your hands around the new technology, make sure all their devices and their endpoints are secure, all these kind of the housekeeping stuff.

But largely when we come to an end of a merger, if you can ever say that there is an end, but once we've kind of got people sorted out with their kit and all the mechanical stuff, we do a retro, like we do with anything. Have a retro with the team just to see how they're feeling and if there's any observations, if there's any observations from us from an integration perspective, but also how it's feeling being part of Sportradar.

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Bradley Howard: Well, thank you so much for sharing those valuable insights with us today, Helen.

To all of our listeners, thank you for joining us today and we look forward to seeing you again next week. If you enjoy today's episode, please share it with your colleagues, your friends and your family. Until next time, I'm Bradley Howard and this has been Tech Reimagined.