TOXIC WAR ROOMS

Paul R. Yost, Ph.D.

Michael P. Yoder, M.I.M.

Center for Leadership Research & Development
Seattle Pacific University

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3307 3rd Ave, W, Suite 107
Seattle, WA 98119
Phone: 206.378.5494
Fax: 206.281.2695
Email: yostp@spu.edu

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Today's IT teams face ever increasing challenges as they seek to navigate the complexities of interdependent systems. When issues arise in organizational networks, the complexity of the systems often requires a collaborative look at the symptoms in order to reach comprehensive solutions. The answer to these critical and complex issues has often been the war room; bringing people together in one location to deal with the emerging crisis with the hope that together, they holistically can address the issues. In limited cases, the war room may be a short-term solution, but rarely does it provide universal long-term solutions. Today the IT landscape in organizations is made up of interdependent networks and applications, managed by teams with their own domains of responsibility, and using their tool of choice. Attempting to bring everyone together who has a stake in the network to identify problems and reactively fix them can make the problem worse in the end. Rather than solving the problem, the sessions can degenerate into finger pointing and defensiveness. Research would suggest that the best teams are the ones with the tools that allow them to see the big picture, know how their part fits into the whole, and use ongoing feedback to work as one team. Effective teams have the tools and diagnostics to assess overall system performance. War rooms, except in the rare and extreme situations, should be avoided.

War rooms are toxic

We'll begin with four ways that war rooms, sometimes also called Tiger Teams or Extreme Collaboration, can be toxic: they lead to defending and deflecting problems rather than solving them; they promote reactivity; they fuel groupthink; and they often lead to poor decisions and lower performance. We'll discuss each of these in turn.

War rooms lead to defending and deflecting problems rather than solving them. When teams are under a lot of pressure, the situation is ambiguous, and the cause of a problem is unclear, several predictable team behaviors are likely to emerge. Some people will avoid taking on any extra work—what psychologists call social loafing. Other people will become defensive and hesitant to take on any additional work. It's not that they are bad people. Instead, team members know that taking on a new problem will mean that several other critical projects will be neglected or postponed. If the cause of the problem is unclear and their own diagnostics suggest that their system is working just fine, why take on additional work? A third common reaction is for team members to become combative, pointing fingers at other people in the group who must be the problem. A final reaction that is for some team members to over-function, trying to control the process and the people around them. In the end, everyone sees the problem through their own lens and everything could look fine using their own troubleshooting tools and monitoring systems. Put these people in the same room and emotions escalate and the team is *less* able to work together to understand the problem domain and get to a resolution of the issue.

War rooms make teams less productive. While teams are in the war room trying to figure out the problem, the key projects they want to focus on are being left behind and client services suffer. Inside the war room, productivity suffers because everyone approaches the problem through their own lens, leading to lots of people talking but little real communication. The lack of coherence and overall vision can lead to what team researchers call "production blocking." Individuals who express their ideas interfere with other people's thought processes. In the worst case, team members get locked into negative patterns: "I'll do something when you can prove that this problem is mine and in my domain." Network, server, and application owners only see the problem through their own tools.

War rooms are reactive not proactive. War rooms are a reactive way to deal with problems. They leave teams to solve problems after they have escalated under extreme conditions that inhibit a team's ability to make good decisions. IT war rooms were originally created and studied as a way to help software development teams work together more effectively. Unfortunately, the practice has been generalized to all IT teams – just put everybody in the same room and people should be able to solve problems faster and more effectively. The problem is that decades of team research suggests that this isn't true. Putting team members together who are responsible for different domains and have limited information is more likely to lead to reactive, poor decisions, that are unlikely to solve the immediate problem or build the capacity for teams to take on future challenges. Agile teams instead build a vision, rely on shared monitoring systems, and have processes in place that help them proactively anticipate and solve problems before they occur. When issues do arise, they have the tools in place to address issues in ways that also prevent the same problems in the future.

War rooms promote groupthink. Some teams become combative and defensive when they are brought together. In other teams, conformity becomes the rule. Bringing people together in ambiguous situations can lead team members to lose themselves in the group. People start thinking alike, groups start to defer to dominant voices, and individual responsibility and creativity disappear. Psychologists call this phenomena "groupthink." When doing something as quickly as possible becomes the goal, fewer alternatives are considered, team members start self-censoring, the group considers less solutions, and getting along becomes more important than finding the best alternative. The team is more likely to continue to pursue one alternative even when the signs increasingly suggest they are headed in the wrong direction.

What is the Alternative?

After several rounds of this, IT teams become less effective over time. Over the past decade, team researchers have begun to explore the conditions that are necessary to build strong, agile, adaptive teams who can perform effectively in highly dynamic environments. These are teams that are self-adaptive, able to proactively identify issues and solve problems in ways that increase overall system performance and build the team's capacity to solve future challenges. Whether they are IT teams, emergency room medical teams, airline cockpit crews, or elite military units, four conditions regularly emerge as particularly critical.

Enhance the teams' ability to see the big picture. In the team research, this is called a shared mental model and means that everyone shares an overall picture of the system and their place in it. In IT teams, this means that teams need to move away from seeing only through their silo and toward an overall system view. This can be done with a common monitoring system that allows them to see how the sub-systems in multiple domains are interacting with each other. For example, time-correlated data from a single data source can help teams see which systems went down first and which ones followed to track down the root cause of problem.

Provide the team with ongoing feedback. Teams are more agile and self-adaptive when they have access to ongoing shared feedback. Shared feedback at the system and sub-system level allows teams to monitor what is happening and assess the impact of their actions on the system. When problems arise, shared feedback allows the group to work together. The team needs a common data system and correlated data to trouble-shoot problems. The bottom line: Feedback, especially at the system level, makes teams smarter, enables them to be more efficient, and improves their performance over time.

Build team trust. Team trust is maximized when teams are focused on a common mission, a common vision, and a common team goal. The ability to focus on issues at the team level is especially important when conflict is high. Teams will always have conflicts, what matters is how they deal with it. Cohesive teams have systems in place that focus attention on the problem and not on personalities. If everyone can only see a problem through their own lens, conflict can escalate when people are brought together in the same room. When teams have a shared mental model and tools to think about the system as a whole, team members are significantly more likely to work together. Problems get solved quicker and the IT team ultimately increases their credibility and trust in the larger organization.

Reward the team for team performance. People are more likely to act as a team when they are rewarded for performing effectively as a team rather than being rewarded based on how their silos are performing. Metrics and diagnostic tools that monitor the overall system promote a shared vision and shared responsibility for overall system performance. More importantly, teams move away from assessing their performance in their domains independent of others. This does not mean that individuals are not held responsible; however, it does mean that individuals are held responsible in the context of how the system is performing. When teams have the tools to work together and are rewarded for it, their attention is directed toward what really matters – the customer's experience.

What Does the Research Say?

War rooms lead to defending and deflecting problems rather than solving them.

Network engineers will see issues through the infrastructure while administrators will view things from the frontline. This uncorrelated view of an issue can have serious consequences in terms of problem resolution. War rooms create an environment where self-preservation through deflection of blame is fostered. People are more likely to point fingers at other departments than accept that network issues are stemming from their IT domain (Grawitch, Block, & Ratner, 2005). The end goal is to exonerate an individual's domain from any responsibility. When things go awry in networks, each domain has their own outlook on the symptoms being presented. Coming together in a war room scenario often serves to solidify preconceived assumptions of issues and rarely will break down the walls of self-preservation. The tendency to stand firm or look for corroborating evidence to support a presumption promotes a confirmation bias (Straus, Parker, & Bruce, 2011). Predetermining that an individual's domain of responsibility is not to blame leads them to focus only on information that is relevant in supporting their hypothesis, and instead they will point the finger at other silos and IT domains. In today's connected world, network restrictions and failures can amount to large productivity losses for any organization. The added stress brought on by the high stakes pressure further entrenches individual's in their assessment of the issue. Territorial behavior can escalate quickly when finger pointing is rampant, but the other side of the coin is that individuals may not even speak up in social situations unless their domain is attacked (Camacho & Paulus, 1995). Once the blame storm starts, it becomes very difficult to harness. Finger pointing is clearly unproductive, and when the pressure to find solutions does not wane, decision quality is often sacrificed in order to achieve some sort of resolution (Kerr & Tindale, 2004).

War rooms make teams less productive

Bringing IT teams together to find a solution requires the perfect conditions and in a group setting, conditions are rarely perfect. Solving network issues requires starting somewhere, but as we have seen, just determining where to start can be difficult when no one is willing to accept responsibility for the overall system performance when viewing the problem from within their silo. Passive participation in the process is a virus that can infect the productivity of a problem solving team. A major issue in bringing people together to solve problems can be social loafing. People are subject to the temptation to slack off when there are others involved in decisions or problem solving (Thompson, 2003). The larger the group, the more social loafing a team can experience. Using war rooms to define problems and contrive solutions requires that all stakeholders be present so that there is a correlated view among members. Having all stakeholders present, often means that group size does indeed increase as does social loafing among war room members.

Production blocking is another concern when relying on bringing individuals together in war rooms to solve network issues. The production losses incurred by an organization are costly when networks fail. The high pressure to get networks running smoothly coupled with the high importance of the situation requires not only quality resolutions, but quality without sacrificing efficiency. Unfortunately, in a war room setting, efficiency is often disregarded as people fall victim to the social implications of the war room. The melee of a war room environment can interfere with an individual's ability to clearly think and articulate ideas to the larger group (Kerr & Tindale, 2004). Social anxiousness within individuals serves to amplify the significance of the social interaction and further inhibit idea generation in many war room members (Brown & Paulus, 1995; Camacho & Paulus, 1995). The dynamics of a war room can inhibit even the most vocal individuals as they are forced to wait for pauses in the conversation. Waiting for pauses in the conversation leaves some ideas

irrelevant by the time they are proposed and individuals are prone to suppress ideas that are relevant if they perceive them not to be pertinent by the time a pause occurs (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987). Flexibility of ideas is also greatly reduced because of the inherent nature of war room situations. Incomplete ideas of others may require group discussion to complete thoughts, regardless of the relevance of the idea to the situation (Thompson, 2003). Starting a train of thought is hard enough, but with the constant derailment of group interactions, it is nearly impossible to have an idea reach its destination still intact (Kerr & Tindale, 2004). Other production blocking issues to consider are the common knowledge effect, overconfidence, and group polarization (Straus, et al., 2011).

Finally, performance matching runs rampant in collaborative situations. Similar to social loafing, performance matching creates the illusion of production, but in reality members only exert as much effort as the lowest producing member (Thompson, 2003). High pressure can lead to this type of laziness because in the end, individuals can point the finger at someone else as being the source of inefficiencies. These inefficiencies not only slow the process, but IT teams are taken away from other critical projects.

Bringing people together creates all sorts of social psychology issues. Group dynamics create numerous pitfalls that individuals must navigate in order to achieve solutions in network issues . To compound the production lost in the group environment, IT teams in a war room scenario are not focused on their ongoing projects within their silos. Taking IT professionals from their primary responsibilities can leave end-users stranded or network structures vulnerable. The opportunity cost of war rooms could further inflate the cost associated with a network that is restricted or has failed.

War rooms are reactive not proactive

Responding to network or application performance crises through war rooms is almost exclusively reactive. A critical application slows; network engineers, the server team, and application administrators must work together to determine the cause of the slowdown so that future slowdowns can be avoided. Customers have less confidence and trust in the IT department (Rhodes, 2010). This post-hoc assessment may not capture all of the details needed in order to make an accurate assessment of the situation. Adaptable teams need to be proactive in assessing conditions that may perpetuate issues down the road. If a team is simply reacting to issues as they arise, they must be able to drop other projects and may eventually feel like they are constantly waging a losing battle. Becoming proactive rather than reactive can be a critical value add to any team in the troubleshooting process (Pavlak, 2004). The goal is to make teams more agile and self-adaptive (Cannon-Bowers & Bowers, 2010).

War rooms promote groupthink

Groupthink is a major stumbling block on the road to a comprehensive solution. IT teams need to remain aware of the task at hand and the root cause of symptoms presented, while not conceding to their natural inclination to go along with the consensus if they believe there is a deeper issue. When war room members communicate, they can often fall prey to the pressure of making a decision as soon as possible. Reaching a decision can be done in various ways, but consensus is often the norm when individuals are brought together. Attaining consensus in IT teams, means that there is likely someone who is not completely satisfied with the decision (Kahneman, Lovallo, & Sibony, 2011). Even if everyone is satisfied, the solution that was reached may not get at the root of the issue because the pressure to find consensus means that not all ideas are thoroughly vetted. Individuals' need for conformity can get in the way of good, well thought out ideas, because individuals will first fulfill their need to be liked within the group (Thompson, 2003). Building on conformity, a second player that leads to groupthink is the evaluation apprehension that individuals feel in

group settings (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987). Fearing that others in the group will evaluate them in negative ways, group members will often withhold their ideas that may be original or exactly what is needed to solve IT issues.

Conclusion

When problems are not resolved, everybody suffers. Complications that cannot be immediately resolved get escalated, the pressure and importance rising with each step up the ladder. Having a correlated view of the problem across domains reduces the need to enter war rooms under the extreme pressure and importance of these highly escalated problems. Escalating problems to this level increases visibility within the greater organization that there is an issue that lacks a resolution. The ramifications of the negative evaluations can be detrimental to ongoing projects that IT members are working on because the priority becomes identifying the root cause and fixing the problem, often at the expense of other important IT projects. Beyond the issues that arise in the war room environment. IT team members lose valuable time and resources that can affect priorities within their individual domains and can lead the organization to lack confidence in their ability to maintain a positive end user experience. Advancing IT infrastructure is hindered when network engineers are pulled to solve system issues. End-user support lags and productivity drops when administrators are brought in to diagnose system wide concerns . Avoiding the war room requires a strong IT team that is equipped with the right tools to address issues as they arise or before they become escalated.

Team Research on Making the War Room Unnecessary

Building a strong IT team may help you avoid the need for war rooms when diagnosing systems issues. Equipping those teams with tools that will better prepare them to see the big picture and constantly monitor issues as they arise, will serve to further diminish the need for war rooms. The best teams are looking for ways to proactively improve the system and strategically upgrade IT infrastructure. Effective teams are not settling for merely preventing downtime, but improving the overall performance of the system and self-adapting to the ever increasing complexities (Tannenbaum, Mathieu, Salas, & Cohen, 2012).

Enhance the team's ability to see the big picture

Giving your IT team the ability to see the big picture is critical to driving to the root of any problem. The complexity of network systems and the desire for individuals to exonerate their domains means that they are often focused on what they know and how they can protect their individual silo. End-user support suffers and productivity drops (Rhodes, 2010). Creating a shared mental model will allow teams to work collaboratively and realize higher productivity. A shared and accurate understanding of the situation will lead teams to a heightened awareness of their interdependencies and in the end, make them more adaptable to whatever issues arise (Burke, Stagl, Salas, Pierce, & Kendall, 2006). Key to this shared mental model is getting a whole correlated view of what is happening within an environment, or specifically for IT teams, what is happening within the system. Moving team members past the limited snapshots of their silos allows for a shared vision of the overall process and allows a dynamic view of the system.

As we have seen, brainstorming reactive solutions in a war room environment hinders an individual's ability to think holistically about a situation (Diehl & Stroebe, 1991; Mullen, Johnson, & Salas, 1991). Instead, individuals who think about the situation independently and then come together, are more likely to share creative and innovative solutions. This can in turn increase everyone's ability to think about their silo in the context of the entire situation rather than utilizing resources to defend their positions. A big picture approach

helps everyone understand who is responsible for what and how their domain interacts with other domains within the system. Transactive memory within teams, knowing one's own role and everyone else's role in a dynamically changing system, requires that people create a shared display so that interdependencies are mapped, and so that roles and responsibilities are clearly understood (Marks, , Mathieu, & Zaccaro, 2001). Creating a big picture creates time correlated information and IT members are able to see the flow of causality rather than simply the links of correlation.

Provide the team with ongoing feedback

A key component in maintaining the big picture for an IT team is to keep them up to date with the latest information. Feedback on the management of server response times can come from the end user to a network administrator or from conducting a network analysis by an engineer. End-user complaints will provide vastly different information to an administrator than a network analysis will. Feedback is a critical aspect of maintaining adaptability, but where the feedback originates and the accuracy of the information can be equally important. An integrated feedback process helps interdependent teams coordinate their work to achieve increased productivity and adaption (Burke et al., 2006).

Accurate and integrated feedback serves to highlight where issues are occurring and focuses attention to the issue at hand without the need to spend resources searching for the issue. Knowing the source of a system failure frees resources that would otherwise be wasted in the war room. This allows IT professionals to instead focus on learning how to solve problems, as well as learn how to learn (Baird & Griffin, 2006). The reallocation of IT resources also permits the individual domains to focus on their high priority projects and adapt those projects to better fit the continually monitored system.

Build team trust

Relieving IT teams of the highly complex and highly stressful environment of the war room fosters collaboration and shifts the focus away from interpersonal issues. Inevitably, teams who are working together to collaboratively solve problems are more likely to build trust as they partner together to achieve results (Kozlowski & Bell, 2012). As teams continue to work together, communication, cooperation, and coordination among members will increase (LePine, Piccolo, Jackson, Mathieu, & Saul, 2008). Social support and confidence may eventually lead to a shared workload and more synergistic IT projects that are collaboratively designed to enhance the organization. Simply putting people in a room together and hoping for the best will more than likely create lasting issues that hinder trust.

Reward the team for team performance

People are more likely to act as a team when they are rewarded for performing effectively as a team rather than being rewarded based on how their silos are performing (Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993; Wageman, Hackman, & Lehman, 2005). Maintaining a team environment that allows members to realize the big picture, constantly monitor the situation, and rely on and support each other is critical. It is equally crucial that recognition be provided in such a way that these process are reinforced and not diminished. Individual rewards in a team environment breaks down the trust and collaboration that has been built (Kahai, Sosik, & Avolio, 2003; Wageman & Baker, 1997). Innovative solutions that arise in team environments must be recognized as group contributions or other members may start the self-preservation and defensive cycle all over again. Rewarding individuals will result in individual performance and be detrimental to team cohesion and productivity. System performance should include recognition of both the network engineers and administrators.

Conclusion

There are clearly some key ingredients in establishing a context where IT teams can be productive and avoid the war room. Creating a big picture leads to correlated reporting and more comprehensive solutions. Ongoing feedback increases knowledge and adaptability within the team. Building trust and reward the group are critical to maintaining this environment, increasing productivity, and ultimately avoiding the sometime destructive environment of the war room.

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