FORCED DISPERSION

Appendix

It was the 20th of March 2020—the day of the Vernal Equinox. Dr. Vishnusharman had been coaching the folks at PCSO for a few months now. The team had been able to put right many of the inadequacies (amber signals) identified by him during his assessment of their Agile journey. They were cruising along very successfully. A few months more and they would be able to call themselves truly Agile.

And then, without warning, the novel Coronavirus struck, bringing with it a pandemic of the disease called Covid-19. The situation in China, where it started, was showing signs of improvement. The situation in Europe (especially Italy and Spain), was alarming and becoming worse. India was just entering the 3rd stage of the spread. So far, things were under control, but people were keeping their fingers crossed.

All the offices of PCSO were shut on March 9. All associates were asked to work from home. Vishnusharman took a well-earned, though forced, break and sat at home, working on a book about Enterprise Agility.

That morning, on March 20, he got a call from Sudarshanaa. He was pleased to hear her voice.

"Dr. Vishnusharman, how is social distancing working for you?"

"Great to hear from you. Pretty well so far. I am making a lot of progress on my book. What about you?"

"Am doing pretty well, too. I was having a video call with Mohammed on the effects this forced dispersal has had on our associates and how Agile works in such a situation. I just got off the call. I thought that maybe I could pick your brain on this, if you have the time."

"I have all the time in the world."

Sudarshanaa said, "You know, Agile teams are about effective teamwork. While classical Agile models prefer co-located teams, many have evolved to handle distributed teams as well. As you could see, for example, we have offices all over the world, and we have two large centres. Of course, most of our software work is done in one or the other development centre, but there are situations, especially where we need to move changes across various versions and instances of the platform, where we do need to work across centres."

"That's true."

"Our Agile way of working, with self-organizing teams and transformational leadership styles, has helped us ensure that where there is a distribution of work across units, the development happens in an effective manner."

She continued, "But now, the pandemic gripping the world has made teams not only distributed but more dispersed, that too without an option to be otherwise."

Vishnusharman smiled and said, "In the chemistry domain, dispersal makes a solution homogeneous, while in this situation, dispersal of teams causes disruption! Individuals and teams now need to think of ways to become extremely fractal and yet be cohesive."

Sudarshanaa said, "That's true. Though I suppose our specific actions and priorities will depend on our context and the readiness of our teams."

"Correct."

"However, a few tips from what you have observed in teams and being effective—that might be useful for us."

"Okay, I'll talk about what the organization should expect and do and also about what the associates should expect and do. I will talk about them in no specific order."

"Okay."

"The first thing that we have to realize—and this follows from what we talked earlier about valuing the associates as much or more than the customer—is that the customers understand the situation we are all in. And they know any response or support they receive will be constrained by this dispersed situation. The safety of the associates and society will need to take priority over customer needs. And associates need to be made aware of this."

"That is absolutely right."

"The other thing that customers and management need to realize is that since this is a forced dispersal, associates may not have had time to set up their home office to the same ergonomic or technological standards (for example, connectivity speed, quality of monitors, etc.) as in their regular office. This, again, may mean, at least initially, a significant loss of productivity. Over time, of course, familiarity with the way of working will make things better."

"That is a good point. We need to factor this aspect into our reckoning. I suppose that the other aspect of this forced dispersal is that many of our associates are young singles sharing accommodation with others, or staying as a paying guest with a host family. They may not have much control over the infrastructure that they can create to effectively work from home. We are aware of this."

Vishnusharman said, "And they are eating from restaurants and other public places, always anxious whether they will have to take Ms. Corona home with them!"

Sudarshanaa said, "Yes. And they may not have made close enough friends to talk to about these worries. We have to factor these in when we think of productivity and also about customer demands. Of course, the folks at the customer end may also be in a similar situation."

Vishnusharman said, "One of the key things that the leaders can do in these situations is communicate. They have to make sure everyone is up-to-date on the latest information regarding the organization and work, and the outside world, including the pandemic."

He continued, "The other key thing that management must do is emphasize the value of trust—'we all trust you and we hope you trust us.' Certainly, this will be helped by the relationship associates have built up over the time they have worked together. But remember, many of the associates may be new."

"I agree. Without trust among the associates, this dispersed working cannot be effective."

Vishnusharman said, "One of the important bonding mechanisms at work—the water cooler moments—will be sorely missed by the dispersed associates. So, associates should try to create these moments through random videos calls with a couple of their co-associates, and talk about last evening's (video!) game, girlfriends/boyfriends, politics, movies, etc. (which, in normal circumstances, may not be considered proper in an office environment!) It is very critical that they do this, especially single men and women, to bring sanity to their lives. For the single person, an office provides the environment to feel 'though solitary, not alone'. Being dispersed should not take away this 'comfort-feel' from them."

Sudarshanaa said, "What would be some of the more mundane things that associates should inculcate into their way of working so that they are effective in their work?"

Vishnusharman said, "The first thing to remember is that if you are a family person, with responsibilities around the house, you need to make sure that you slot in time for this. Remember that your partner at home may be in the same situation. And if there are children (and they have no school!), it is even more critical that associates make sure that they are able to spend adequate time in both professional work and housework, with a proper work-life balance. And remember, the normal child-care facilities may not be available, so maybe you may have to have arrangements with neighbours to help each other out."

Sudarshanaa smiled and said, "I remember a Dilbert cartoon a long time ago where Dilbert, who was working from home, wonders whether he owes the organization the contracted eight hours or only the five hours of work he would have accomplished if he had gone to the office to work!"

Vishnusharman said, "People normally are not productive all eight hours of their office time. So, five or six hours at home, undisturbed, should be equivalent to the eight at the office."

"Of course, many people will save some time by not having to commute to work. This time can be put to good use as 'social' or 'family' time."

"Correct."

He continued, "One of the most important things that teams working in this dispersed fashion needs to know is that team norms and agreements are extremely important in these situations. I am sure you know what team norms are. These norms concern how members of the team will conduct themselves in interactions with one another. For example, team members will not be late for meetings, they will reply to emails within 24 hours, etc. They also talk of higher aspects, like team members will avoid office politics, they will treat one another with respect, they will be open with their colleagues, they may disagree with group decisions but have to commit to them, etc."

"I understand. It is important, especially in these dispersed situations, to ensure that people follow these norms. Else frustrations can start appearing."

Vishnusharman said, "Correct. And talking of frustrations, it is important that people publicize when they are available to be disturbed, and when not, so that people don't call each other at the drop of a hat. But it is important that everyone is available for everyone else."

Vishnusharman continued, "It is important that all the normal Agile ceremonies are gone through, using video conferencing. You know, stand-ups, retros, etc. with the scrum masters playing their normal role. Other standard things like pairing, backup working, etc. should also be done normally."

Sudarshanaa said, 'I suppose it is also important that people update each other continuously on what they are doing, and are up to, using planning and tracking boards. Also, use Slack and other online real-time tools to keep each other updated on other activities and needs."

Vishnusharman said, "It is also important to have fun. Maybe one joke a person per day? Maybe some limericks (making sure it is appropriate!), some games that people can play with each other, and as a team, share some songs. It is also important that people, even if they can't go out, look out and enjoy the fresh green leaves of the spring, the mango flowers and the jacaranda in bloom."

Sudarshanaa said, "Yes. All of these things are important. The main thing is, isn't it, to keep ones' spirits up and believe in the well-known adage, 'This too shall pass'?"

"Yes. You have got that right. 'The Coronavirus scare, too, as everything else in life, shall pass, maybe in a month, maybe in two months, or maybe a year."

"Thank you for talking to me, sir. Hope you have a good day."

"It was my pleasure. You, too, have a good day."