

HELLO, I'M YOUR PRODUCER!

STRATEGIES FOR INTRODUCING PRODUCTION

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This is “Hello! I’m Your Producer” Strategies for Introducing Production.

I am Veronica Peshterianu, and about a year ago I found myself walking into my current studio and saying those words to my new team.

ABOUT ME



SYSTEM ERA

ASTRONEER

Veronica Pestieranu - Hello, I'm Your Producer! - 2018

I am the producer at System Era and we make a space sandbox exploration game called Astroneer.

Prior to that, I worked at large first-party studios, like PopCap and 343 Industries, where the role of production had been established many years before I arrived. So as you can imagine, coming to a small independent studio was a big change.

However, this was not the first time I was the first producer on a team. This happens often enough in the games industry as new teams form or new studios open

GOAL OF THIS TALK



Veronica Pestrianu - Hello, I'm Your Producer! - 2018

Highlight challenges of coming in as a team's first producer

Share strategies for introducing production to a team

Help you create a **foundation of collaboration and trust**

So whether you are going through this process right now, or think you may in the future,

my goal today is to highlight some of challenges you may face coming in as a team's first producer.

To share strategies which can help you overcome those challenges and successfully introduce production methodologies to your team

While helping you establish a foundation of collaboration and trust

YOUR TEAM

GDC
PRODUCER BOOTCAMP

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First, let's meet your team.

I will admit that it's mostly patterned after the Astroneer team

YOUR TEAM

GDC
PRODUCER BOOTCAMP

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Though names and details have been changed to protect the innocent.

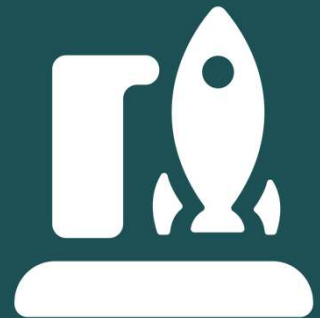
The team you join may not necessarily be an indie studio – it can be a newly formed tech organization, or a prototype team working to pitch new IP within a large studio.

The strategies we'll discuss can be applied to a variety of game teams in almost any part of the development cycle.

YOUR TEAM



Small but growing



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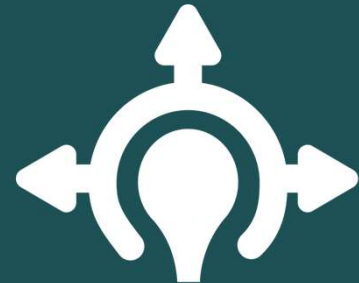
Let's say this team is small but growing. Their success has allowed them expand beyond the original members and begin hiring for more specialized roles.

YOUR TEAM



Small but growing

Distributed production tasks



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They have been sharing production responsibilities among the members, because, let's be honest, even teams that don't have a formal producer have someone doing at least parts of the work.

Whether it's a generally organized person stepping in to put some guardrails around chaos

or a Lead taking over capacity planning their direct reports, someone is filling the producer's shoes.

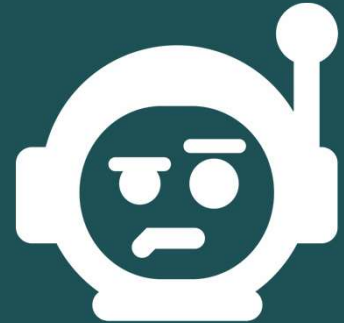
YOUR TEAM



Small but growing

Distributed production tasks

Inconsistent process in place



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And because of this distributed production role, there may be some process in place, but more than likely it's inconsistently applied.

As an example, bugs being tracked in one database, and tasks being handled via another system

YOUR MISSION



Establish the **development roadmap** and create a **production process** which enables the team to **scale up** and successfully **ship the game**.



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Of course the first thing you want to do is figure out your mission and plan of action

And based on the team I just described, this is a very sensible plan – organize the roadmap, establish some process, help them grow, ship and succeed

YOUR MISSION DELIVERABLES



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Establish the **development roadmap** and create a **production process** which enables the team to **scale up** and successfully **ship the game**.



But this is not really your mission, these are you deliverables.

These are the tangible results of your efforts as the producer that you can talk about with your manager, your team, or your studio leaders.

In order to really understand your mission, you need to consider the challenges you may face as the first producer

YOUR CHALLENGES

Re-forming



The first is re-forming . Many of you have heard of Tuckman's stages of group development or “forming – storming – norming – performing.” If not, there are many great online resources that describe them and I encourage you to read more on this topic.

Part of the discourse around this theory is that whenever a new person joins, the team will go through all the phases of the cycle again.

And though the team will get more efficient at getting back to performing with each new member, the rebuilding of trust and establishing communication has to happen.

In our case, the producer is often the person who's facilitating that re-forming period which can be challenging as the newest person on the team

YOUR CHALLENGES

Re-forming

The “Overseer” is here



You may also encounter the perception that a managerial force has arrived to tell everyone what to do.

And if your team is small, you may well be the first person that is not directly contributing to the code or content creation of the game.

This perception is less problematic at companies which have had producers for a long time,

but you shouldn't assume that every person on the team is 100% bought into a producer coming on board, particularly if the team has been demonstrably successful without one ...

YOUR CHALLENGES



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Re-forming

The "Overseer" is here

Disruption to the status quo



Finally, the arrival of a producer means a disruption of the status quo.

Because you do want to establish the roadmap, and implement process, and help the team navigate the perilous waters of development

and that means change is coming even if it stems from a true desire to help your team succeed

YOUR ACTUAL MISSION



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Build trust with your team by establishing a **collaborative relationship** so that you can successfully **introduce production methodologies**, which have measurable results.

So with these challenges in mind your actual mission falls more on the soft skills side of the producer equation.

By focusing on building trust and establishing a collaborative relationship with your team, you can begin with implementing small, measurable improvements to process which can then lead to larger, more formal changes

Ultimately resulting in a strong partnership between you and the team.

YOUR ACTUAL MISSION



Veronica Pestrianu - Hello, I'm Your Producer! - 2018

Build trust with your team by establishing a **collaborative relationship** so that you can successfully **introduce production methodologies**, which have measurable results.

...and resist the "Fix It!" urge

Oh and also ... resist the fix it urge

A word of warning



When you arrive, you will inevitably spot things you consider to be inefficiencies or problems.

You will want to fix them immediately, even more so if you've experienced these problems in the past.

What's the harm, right? You are just trying to help...

Don't. Resist the urge.

Because that kind of "whipping into shape" mentality can set you at a disadvantage with your team, particularly with those team members who aren't yet 100% on board with production.

Remember that change takes time and works best when accomplished in collaboration with the team.

ACHIEVING YOUR MISSION

1. Listen to your team
2. Clear the plate
3. Understand the tools
4. Offer evolution, not revolution
5. Know your audience



Okay, you've met your team, you've established your mission, you're ready to go – let's get in to some strategies which can help you succeed.

The good news is that none of these require a decade of game development experience, years of trusted relationships, or decision-making authority in the studio.

LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM



At the heart of your mission is conveying to your team that you are in a service role for them and are there to make their lives easier.

That begins with listening.

In your first few weeks you should make time to meet with every person on your team, one on one, especially if your team is smaller than 15 people. If you can't find time to talk to everyone, or your team is very large, sit down with stakeholders or leads of your team,

I would also recommend meeting with a couple of folks that have been on the team the longest.

They will have the most background on the project and will provide valuable historical context for you

LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM



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What in the current process is **working** for you?

What in the current process is **not working** for you?

What is your **#1 concern** right now?

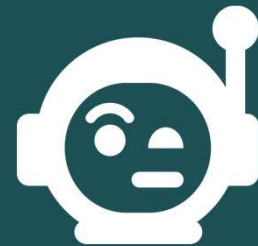
The key here is to listen, but ask these three questions

The last one does not have to be process related, and will give you valuable insight into the state of the team

LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM



Commonalities in “**process**” answers become your **roadmap**



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Over the course of the meetings, collate the process answers, look for patterns.

Commonalities in answers will give you a roadmap of what to tackle in terms of improvements

LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM



Commonalities in “**process**” answers become your **roadmap**

Commonalities in “**concern**” answers become your **priorities**



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The commonalities in concerns will give you your first order of business

EXAMPLE: LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM



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"We haven't shipped an update in months!"



Here's an example from Astroneer of this strategy in action

After meeting with my new teammates in my first week or so, I was very surprised to find that every single one of them, to the person, had the same answer for their number one concern.

We haven't shipped an update in months. And I thought, okay, there must be something happening here

EXAMPLE: LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM



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Plan of Action:

► **Observe existing planning meetings**

The team was in the middle of working on their first update when I came on board, so I began with observing their existing planning meetings to get a better idea of what was going on.

Now to be fair, the team had gone through some big changes before I arrived, and some churn was to be expected.

But while sitting in on the meeting and listening to the conversations I realized that in the midst of all this change, they hadn't taken the time to come back and re-align on the goals and deliverables of the update

EXAMPLE: LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM

Plan of Action:

- ▶ Observe existing planning meetings
- ▶ **Whiteboard out goals and deliverables**

The next week I called a meeting with the team to whiteboard out the current goals of the release, intended deliverables, and remaining tasks.

It was just as much for me to understand the release as much as it was for the team to re-align with one another

EXAMPLE: LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM



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Plan of Action:

- ▶ Observe existing planning meetings
- ▶ Whiteboard out goals and deliverables
- ▶ **Repeat exercise for next update**

that went over pretty well, it was a very productive meeting, so I repeated the goals and tasks exercise at the beginning of the second update cycle.

EXAMPLE: LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM



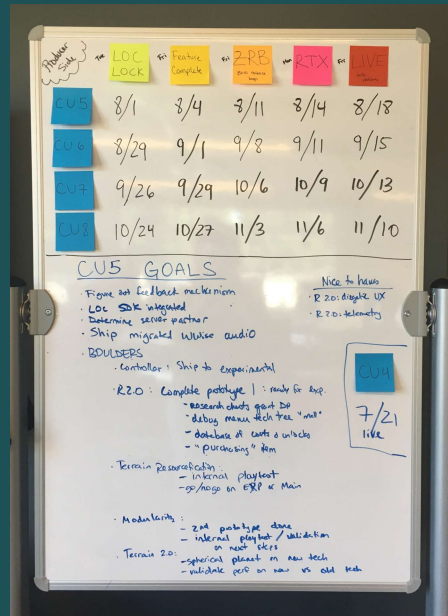
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Plan of Action:

- ▶ Observe existing planning meetings
- ▶ Whiteboard out goals and deliverables
- ▶ Repeat exercise for next update
- ▶ **Plan third update in advance**

And then we did it again during the second update development cycle to plan for the third in advance

EXAMPLE: LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM



The result is this little whiteboard which stands in the common space and a process that now happens at every release,

All dates, goals and sub-goals are clearly visible to the team, created with their buy in, and reviewed each week during planning

EXAMPLE: LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM



At the end of the day, the team's biggest concern had a process gap at its core, and by starting with listening and observing, we were able to resolve it AND introduce a production methodology to the team

LISTEN TO YOUR TEAM



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Resolving a big concern quickly **restores focus**, **builds trust**, and is the **first step** in the pattern you're trying to establish.

Resolving a big concern as soon as possible has multiple benefits

First, it helps the team focus on other important things, more on that in a bit,

It gives you a “win” which helps build trust

And it's the first step in a pattern of the producer reacting to team needs

CLEAR THE PLATE



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On the topic of focus -- another strategy to help you succeed as the producer is clearing the team's plate of distracting tasks

CLEAR THE PLATE



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You want to understand the development process.

Your team wants focus on things they love to do.

Just like resolving a pressing concern, removing distracting tasks is a win-win situation!

As you are ramping up and learning more about the team, you want understand the development process.

Meanwhile, your team wants to focus on the things they love to do and are best at .

This exercise is very useful on small teams where people wear many hats and where production responsibilities have been shared among multiple team members.

CLEAR THE PLATE



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You want to understand the development process.

Your team wants focus on things they love to do.

You want your team doing what they are best at.

The desired effect of course is that your team's restored focus and newfound extra time translates back into new features, skill development, polish and iteration

CLEAR THE PLATE



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Find tasks that are **necessary** and **discipline agnostic**



When choosing how to lighten the load, picking discipline agnostic tasks is the KEY.

Don't start your tenure as producer, for example, by taking design work away from your designers.

CLEAR THE PLATE



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Some examples:

- ▶ Managing external vendors
- ▶ Localization
- ▶ Playtesting
- ▶ Release Management / Certification Submission

Some good places to start are handling external vendor communication, your localization submission progress, organizing regular internal and external playtests, and taking on release management – especially if you have to submit to platform certification for your releases

In large studio scenarios these tasks are often handled by specific people or groups. But on our hypothetical small team, these are usually up for grabs .

CLEAR THE PLATE



Get **hands-on**



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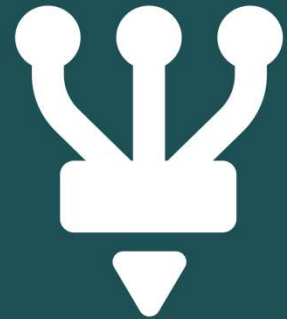
Your goal is to be hands-on with some of the day to day deliverables of your team so that once you're working alongside them, you can experience the workflows first hand and can better target your improvements.

CLEAR THE PLATE



Get **hands-on**

But **DO NOT** become **critical path**



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But DO NOT become critical path.

This is a lot harder on small teams where there is so much you can take on. Picking up tasks here and there to help others could snowball into you owning parts of the game,

And then your production responsibilities will start taking a backseat to implementation tasks. So monitor your own capacity just as you would another team member's.

EXAMPLE: CLEAR THE PLATE



Localization process handled by Sound Designer and required Engineering



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Let's look at another example from Astroneer which highlights the strategy

For the early access release and the ongoing content updates, localization was handled by the Sound Designer and required an Engineer to help each release to manually export and import of strings.

Astroneer is available in 13 languages so this process took a bunch of time and the work had to be slotted between critical feature work and bug fixes for both team members.

EXAMPLE: CLEAR THE PLATE

Plan of action:

- ▶ **Take over manual processes**



My first step was to take over as many pieces of the manual process as possible from both the Sound Designer and Engineer.

This didn't free up the Engineer immediately, but it entirely relieved the Sound Designer, allowing him to refocus on his work

EXAMPLE: CLEAR THE PLATE



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Plan of action:

- ▶ Take over manual processes
- ▶ **Investigate new localization solution**

I also took over investigating a few, more automated localization solutions that the engineer had suggested but didn't get a chance to follow up on

EXAMPLE: CLEAR THE PLATE



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Plan of action:

- ▶ Take over manual processes
- ▶ Investigate new localization solution
- ▶ **Roadmap the move to new solution**

We found something that met our needs, then roadmapped out the work required to implement

EXAMPLE: CLEAR THE PLATE



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Plan of action:

- ▶ Take over manual processes
- ▶ Investigate new localization solution
- ▶ Roadmap the move to new solution
- ▶ **Gradually transition over three releases**

And gradually made the change over the next three releases.

EXAMPLE: CLEAR THE PLATE



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Plan of action:

- ▶ Take over manual processes
- ▶ Investigate new localization solution
- ▶ Roadmap the move to new solution
- ▶ Gradually transition over three releases
- ▶ **Create a runbook for anyone to follow**

The last step was to create a runbook for the process so that anyone on the team could execute the export, send off translations, and import of the strings.

EXAMPLE: CLEAR THE PLATE

Result:

- ▶ An inefficiency addressed by new workflow
- ▶ Two team members got time back
- ▶ Process can be repeated by anyone



In the end, an inefficiency in a required process was addressed by a new workflow

And two individual contributors got time back to focus on their primary work

This process was discipline agnostic and with a new workflow in place, can be repeated by anyone who has the capacity to take it on

UNDERSTAND THE TOOLS



Clearing the Plate for another team member is a great segue to doing something which you should do on any team, regardless of whether you're the first producer or the tenth

And that is Understanding the tools and pipelines your team uses

UNDERSTAND THE TOOLS



Understanding the workflows helps make informed decisions on scope and priority



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Knowing that a particular game system tends to be bug prone or knowing the steps involved in your asset pipeline helps you highlight potential risks before they become big problems.

It will also help you resolve priority conflicts when they arise

Producers have to understand the big picture and that includes the workflows just as much as the creative vision

UNDERSTAND THE TOOLS



Understanding the workflows helps make informed decisions on scope and priority

Make it easier for your team to talk to you

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It is also vital to maintaining a good partnership between you and the team.

You want to make it easy for the team to come to you with problems because they know you understand what they work with day to day

UNDERSTAND THE TOOLS



Veronica Pestrianu - Hello, I'm Your Producer! - 2018

Understanding the workflows helps make informed decisions on scope and priority

Make it easier for your team to talk to you

Do not need to become a subject matter expert!

You don't need to be an expert because a basic understanding of things will go a long way to helping you manage the project effectively

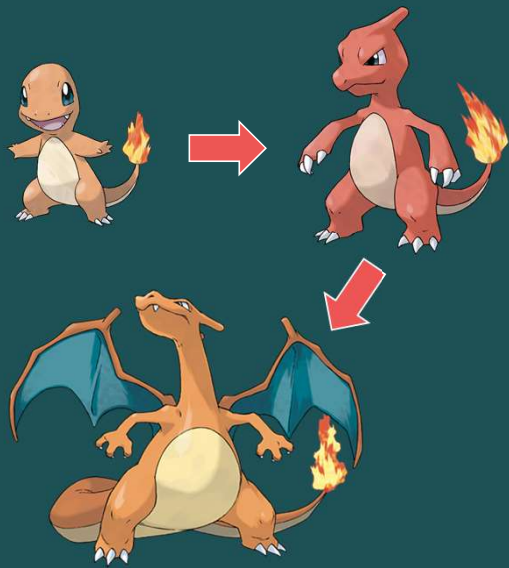
EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



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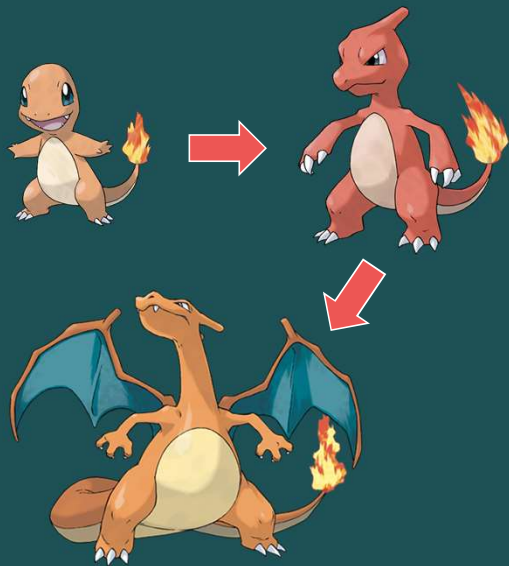
This next strategy, I believe, is the most important to your success as the first producer and will set the tone for how you introduce production to your team team

EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



And that is to Offer evolution

EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



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Not revolution

Right here is where the fix it urge is the strongest.



You may read a project management book, watch a post mortem, or attend a GDC talk much like this one, and immediately want to implement everything you've learned...

Don't.

Because a measured approach in this case is crucial if you are to succeed.

EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



Rarely does a rapid and complete change in process end up having full buy-in from the team or sticking for the long term.

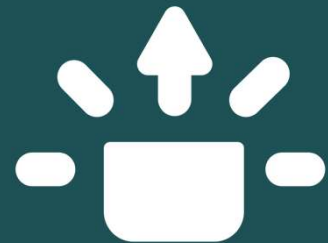
Remember the challenges from earlier – a sudden overhaul really does seem like an Overseer has arrived to tell everyone how to work

So how do we introduce process - Well you've spent all this time observing, listening, learning and helping, and now the time has come to put that knowledge to work.

EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



Pick one thing that is not working well and propose a one-change solution



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To start, review what your team has said is not working for them in their process and note a few issues that you've noticed yourself

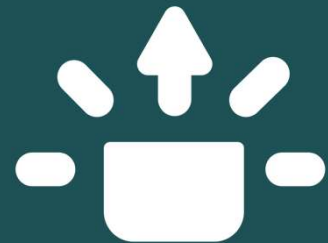
Pick one process gap from that list and make one change to it

EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



Pick one thing that is not working well and propose a one-change solution

Must be easy to implement and iterate



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Why one change? So it is easy to implement and iterate on the results.

If you propose an elaborate restructure, it becomes difficult to separate which parts are working and which parts aren't

And it's lot more work to undo if it's really not working

EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



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Choose measurable improvements



Choosing improvements with clearly measurable outcomes is key. Look for things like

Fewer bugs filed in a feature

More bugs fixed during a sprint

Stable build days increased

Milestone dates consistently hit

Make the result really easy to evaluate both for you and your team...

EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



Choose measurable improvements

Present and treat changes as temporary



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You should present and treat changes to process as temporary proposals

After two weeks of a trying something new, check back in with your team, get their feedback

If it works, great. Keep it. If it doesn't, iterate and try again.

EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



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Choose measurable improvements

Present and treat changes as temporary

Reinforce collaboration in this evolution



By reinforcing the collaborative nature of this evolution, you maintain alignment and trust between you and the team, leading to methodologies that stick for a longer period of time

EXAMPLE: EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



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Problem: "We file bugs but never look at them"

Existing Process: Bugs tracked in JIRA

Here are a couple of quick examples of how one-change solutions can result in long term process changes ...

One concern I heard from the Astroneer team was that bugs were being filed in our database, we use JIRA on our team, but they weren't being addressed very often.

EXAMPLE: EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



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Problem: "We file bugs but never look at them"

One-change solution: Set up bug review meeting

So I set up a bug review meeting once a week for about a month to go over what was there.

During those meetings, we established our definitions for priority and assigned out urgent bugs to be fixed

EXAMPLE: EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



Veronica Pestrianu - Hello, I'm Your Producer! - 2018

Problem: "We file bugs but never look at them"

Final process: Regular bug triage

Measurable Result: Game is more stable!

Over the course of the next few months, we settled on a more consistent bug triage process and have since added a dedicated week of bug fixing for every milestone.

That has lead to major stability improvements in the game and healthy discussions among the team about bug priority and impact.

And it all started with just sitting down at one meeting a week

EXAMPLE: EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



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Problem: "I can't clearly see what my tasks are."

Existing Process: JIRA, Monday planning

Another issue was the inconsistent tracking of tasks for each week and each milestone.

Luckily for me, the team had already decided to use JIRA for productivity and had an established weekly kick off meeting on Monday mornings

EXAMPLE: EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



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Problem: "I can't clearly see what my tasks are."

One-change solution: Sprint views and filtering

Using that as a starting point, I set up better sprint views and helpful filters in JIRA so the team would get comfortable with the software,

That led to increased visibility into each individual's work but also everyone else's

EXAMPLE: EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



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Problem: "I can't clearly see what my tasks are."

Final process: Monday planning and weekly tracking

Measurable Result: Less unplanned work

From there, we started using the Monday meeting as an alignment point for the team's weekly tasks and the overall milestone goals

This reduced the number of carry over tasks week to week because there was less unplanned work happening during the sprint.

The team went from individual, inconsistent tracking methods to using JIRA as the touchpoint for what needs to happen now and in the future

EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



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Evolution came from making small changes to existing process

Over the last year, these processes have become much more formalized than they were when I arrived and will keep evolving as the team gives me feedback on what is working for them

But in both cases, it started with small changes addressing concerns and gaps in the existing processes, making it easier for the team to adopt and get on board with

EVOLUTION, NOT REVOLUTION



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Evolution came from making small changes to existing process

Promote what is working when you can



It's also important to remember that not every change involves fixing something broken.

There is just as much value in promoting something that was already working for your team before you got there. In that case, your task is to ensure that it's consistently practiced or introduced to other parts of the project.

In both examples I gave, the team was already doing something that worked for them, like the one week sprints, there was no reason for me to change that if the team was bought-in.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE



And that leads us to the final piece of this puzzle, knowing and understanding your audience.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE



Process is a tool, not a directive



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My philosophy is that process is a tool, not a directive. Treating process as a non-negotiable runs counter to the service-centric core of production.

Bernie Yee, who is a producer at Oculus gave a talk at this bootcamp a few years ago and said “The best process is the one the team buys into.”

And you should keep that in mind as you develop the processes of your new team

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE



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Process is a tool, not a directive

Merge what you know with what you've learned



Even the strategies I've given you today are suggestions.

Ultimately, the right way to introduce production to your team will be a combination of what you've learned about them and what ideas you bring to the table whether from this talk, or other sources

For production methodologies to succeed, they must to be proposed with the individual team at their heart.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE



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Process is a tool, not a directive

Merge what you know with what you've learned

Ensure team is moving toward the goal



You may even want to consider different methodologies for the various disciplines and subteams, and this can work as long as you ensure that the whole team is moving toward the same goal

EXAMPLE: KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE



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Look at **what's working**

Note commonalities within disciplines

Work with those groups directly to refine

When focusing on a group, you can start by going back to the “what’s working” answers to the “process” questions from the very beginning

Look for some commonalities in the answers among the disciplines. If there are some – great – that is the basis to your group process. If there aren’t any, this may signal an opportunity to brainstorm with the group directly.

There is a different approach to apply to each discipline, so it’s important to collaborate to refine with the team

EXAMPLES: KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE



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Engineering: Granular task tracking and estimation

Design: Undirected gameplay exploration

Art: Visual pipeline for asset creation

These are general examples, but you may find that engineers want to track their velocity using more formal software engineering estimation practices, Designers may want set-aside time to ideate and discuss before locking in their design documents, Artists may want to set up a step-by-step Kanban-style board to track their asset pipeline unlike their Scrum-based counterparts.

And that's okay. You as the producer are there to ensure that ultimately all of these developers are happy, productive, and marching to the same end goal.

FINAL THOUGHTS

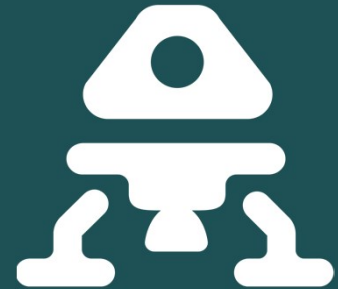


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Focus on the team

Every team is **different**

Be ready to **adapt**



Now, to tie it all together, I'll leave you with some final thoughts and a quick review.

Your job as the producer is to focus on the team so the team can focus on the product.

The needs of every team and every product is different

be ready to adapt to new situations as your team grows or the market shifts, the only constant in production is change

REMEMBER YOUR STRATEGIES

1. Listen to your team
2. Clear the plate
3. Understand the tools
4. Offer evolution, not revolution
5. Know your audience



Armed with these strategies, you should feel confident that when you find yourself saying “Hello, I’m your producer” you will be able to forge a strong partnership with your new team and help them succeed

Change takes time, so as you gradually introduce production methodologies, give yourself the space to celebrate the triumphs and learn from the missteps

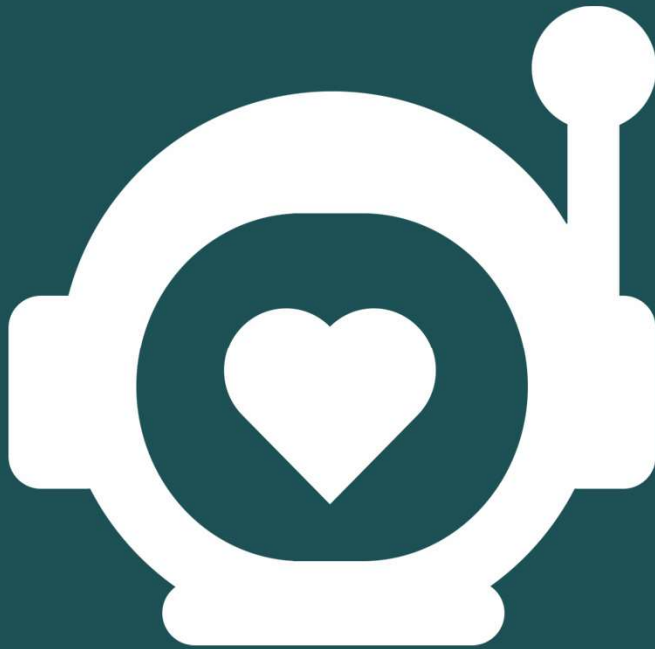
REMEMBER YOUR MISSION



Build trust with your team by establishing a **collaborative relationship** so that you can successfully **introduce production methodologies**, which have measurable results.

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As long as you keep your mission in mind, keep listening, observing, and making the team's priorities your priorities, in no time you will find



that you as the producer have become a trusted, valued, and integral part of the team.



THANK YOU!

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