Don't look up, or a satire of your technical debt

In the 2021 movie, Don't look up, produced and distributed by Netflix, we see our capacity to be indifferent to what matters. In the case of the movie, this is centred around society's actions and reactions to climate change and pushes us to open our eyes to reality. But the allegory can also work in business; ignoring your technical debt might just cost you your company.

Temps de lecture : minute

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"This will affect the entire planet."

No matter how hard you try to avoid it, it is extremely likely that your company will face a technical debt. Its origins can vary tremendously from a competitive recruitment landscape for developers to a change in leadership, from high spender customers requiring specific features, to a tsunami of unexpected bugs, or maybe constant roadmap deviations made to please new customers. At this stage, it could be a mix of all of these things, and searching for the right person or department to blame is just a waste of time.

It would be simplistic to say that the technical debt is the technical team's problem, much like it is too simplistic to say that revenue is solely the responsibility of the sales team.

A sales team that has a poor product cannot be successful.

A technical team that constantly deviates from its plan to satisfy ad hoc

requests from the sales and customer success teams cannot be successful.

Symptoms of the technical debt are as follows:

- The roadmap is not delivering any new features and has no plans to do so in the next 12 months
- The roadmap is catching up with essential features to keep it up with the market
- The product roadmap is no longer visionary nor inspiring (no differentiators)
- Churn is increasing due to low customer satisfaction (too many tickets linked to unresolved software issues)
- The sales pipeline is slowing down. And the deals that are won are won on false promises
- Historical partners are finding new software vendors in a competitive landscape.

And more.

Not all of these symptoms are individually a representation of the technical debt but combined. They certainly are a strong diagnosis.

On their own, each of these symptoms are not necessarily representative of the technical debt, but combined they are a worrying diagnosis.

> ## Kate Dibiasky: "I have news for you. It's already a complete disaster."

Unfortunately, by the time symptoms appear, the sales, marketing, and customer success department have already launched catastrophic missiles at an overloaded, overworked, and exhausted technical team...

it goes something like this:

- The sales department complains that the solution is not unique enough and that their customers' requests are not considered. The sales will assume that this is why they cannot sign new clients.
- The customer success lashes out, exhausted from dealing with dissatisfied customers who cannot get an answer about how and when their issue in the software/platform/solution will be fixed.
- The marketing department can no longer take the pressure of generating new leads with 3-year-old messaging and an outdated value proposition.

> *Randall Mindy: "How do we even talk to each other? What've we... What've we done to ourselves? How do we fix it?"*

The most important and difficult step is to admit as early as possible that the technical debt exists. Before symptoms occur. Find a plan to overcome it, and communicate appropriately.

> *Randall Mindy: "Not everything needs to sound so clever, charming, or likable all the time. Sometimes we need just to be able to say things to one another. We need to hear things."*

Sometimes the easiest route is the one to take. In all the symptoms and frustrations, we notice that all the departments have objectives in silos. They work together within their team but do not work together towards a common goal for the company.

The technical team must bring visibility and transparency to the challenges the team is facing. If the technical debt is, in fact, occurring, it is essential to explain what this means in simple terms that are understandable by all. No lies, no bullshit. If the team needs 18 months to get back on the visionary track, then this is the timeline that should be communicated. Ignoring, masking, or lying about the issue will only let the situation fester even further. This will enable the customer-facing departments to devise a plan to protect the technical team by stepping up on the frontline and knowing what should be done.

> *Randall Mindy: "As long as you do the right thing. We're there for you."*

Here are a few pro tips for what each department could do (non-exhaustive list):

Sales should be able to work a new ideal customer profile based on the current product maturity and push back on filling out requests for proposals that are not a match. Furthermore, prospects will always ask for a special feature that has no impact on their business, and it is important to educate the customer on how little importance this feature would have. Remaining open to suggestions is important as some key features with maximum impact on the business could be considered in the roadmap, especially if they align with the plan to fix the technical debt or require just a few days' work.

The customer success department is on the frontline. Customers can scream for bugs that have little to no impact on the overall usage and the business. It is essential to take the time to talk, qualify, interrogate and challenge the customer to filter out which ones are the most impactful at scale to feed the arbitrage team so the development team does not get

lost in a tsunami of requests.

Marketing should support the entire company by focusing on the solution's strengths, the stories of clients that have confirmed their trust and engagement, and boost the messaging around problems that need solving rather than features and functions. The marketing team should also play an essential role in supporting the definition of the most accurate Ideal Customer profile, one that belongs to the value proposition of today without overselling or overreaching.

> Kate Dibiasky: "I will be 100% behind this effort. No matter how offensive I may find you."

In essence, you've understood it. The key is communicating openly about the issue so the entire company can work ENSEMBLE with a common and global objective. This enables the company to maintain and grow the revenue while giving time and space to the technical team to work through the debt and work on a new visionary roadmap.

> Randall Mindy: "Everything is theoretically impossible until it is done"

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