

From Fire Drill to Operating Model

What happens after the AI emergency, when the whole business has to keep the speed

Dustin Warner | Director of Software Engineering, NRC Health

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nrc HEALTH | Human Understanding®

Founded in 1981 and publicly traded on NASDAQ (NRC), NRC Health generates ~$143M in annual revenue with approximately 425 employees. For over four decades, NRC Health has led the charge to personalize healthcare, helping leading health systems understand each unique individual they serve.

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Proven Innovation

First to deploy real-time PX surveys, discharge calls & AI-powered insights

NRC HEALTH SOLUTIONS



The Engineering Org

- Dustin Warner, Director of Software Engineering
- 30 engineers and managers across 3 teams
- Value-stream teams for each product line, plus enabling teams



What started as an emergency was only the catalyst.

The bigger story is how it is changing the way our whole organization works.

Meet David



David Burik

EVP, Strategic Insights, NRC Health

Leads The Governance Institute and Market Insights, NRC Health's work with health system boards and C-suites

30+ years advising healthcare organizations on growth, performance improvement, and systems integration

Known for challenging conventional thinking and helping complex organizations make decisions

You'll hear from him twice in this talk.

Why it took an emergency



David · EVP, NRC Health

Listen for: where the creativity was going

The emergency

The platform our flagship product runs on was bought by a competitor.

MISSION

Rebuild the platform

Renewal was in question, and we were not signing it.

TEAM

3 people, AI-first

A small team with the whole problem in front of them.

OBJECTIVE

Live in ~90 days

Keep a top-3 revenue product running for our partners.

Nobody argued about process. Everyone knew what was at stake.

The first gear in a larger machine

AI enabled the impossible

The rebuild showed that with the right people in the room and the right tools we could do amazing things.



Project, Product, Organization

What started as one project changed how we view our product and now our organization.



After March EAIS



1 week >7 months

We went from discussions, documents and handoffs to our emergency model. It worked.



“This is not working.”

A few of us saw this coming. Like a dog on a leash, we could see where we needed to go, but we couldn’t direct the change until the emergency took the leash off.

A synthetic org chart



David · EVP, NRC Health

Listen for: what he refused to do

The new mission, team and objectives

Shared across the business, owned by every seat at the table.

MISSION

Keep the speed

Continual outcomes for our partners, without waiting for a fire.

TEAM

The synthetic org

Sales, Service, Operations and Product + Tech on one product.

OBJECTIVES

Margin and growth

Five product goals the whole group agreed on.

Same org chart. Everyone owns the same goals.

Then the Right People Entered the Room

CEO Involvement

Strategic priority, not just a tech initiative

David: Product-Line Ownership

Changed the environment, not just approved the work

Stakeholders + Technology

Operations and engineering in the same room

On-Site Collaboration

Proximity replaced handoffs and documents

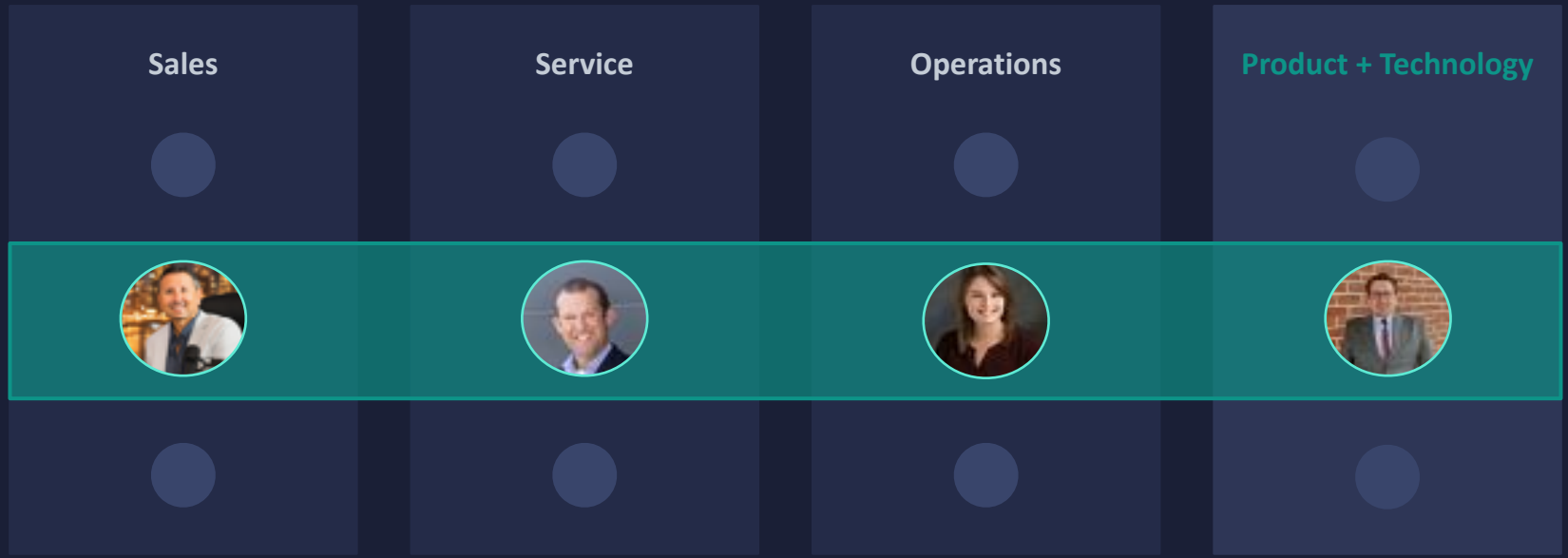
Assumptions Challenged

No more filtered feedback through layers

Ownership Over Handoffs

Each person owned outcomes, not tasks

MISO: the synthetic org chart



Same org chart. Everyone went from several products to one — and for this product, product and technology are now one team.

What each seat brought to the table

Sales	Brought the pipeline. Ideas that were sold but may not exist yet. Brought visibility to the key features that would close the deal.
Service	Identified partners willing to beta test. Daily stories from our clients on what was working and what was not. How could we increase satisfaction and partner joy when working in our platform?
Operations	Revealed real workflow, not the documented one. Showed what it took to get a customer up and running, including all of the small manual adjustments required for every customer. What it took to keep the lights on and data relevant.
Product + Tech	Decisions in days, not sprints. Bring ideas not just problems or concerns. Quick prototyping for feasibility and expectations.

Every ask was for time they didn't have, for a product that didn't exist yet.

What came with us from the emergency

1

Working software is the meeting

Need → prototype → observe → decide → iterate. People react to something real by day two.

2

Five teams of three

Small teams make ownership visible. There is nowhere for a decision to hide.

3

Build three, throw two away

For reversible decisions, proving an option is now cheaper than debating it.

What changed: the whole business is now in the feedback loop, not just engineering.

How the leaders changed

More collaboration

Leaders build alongside their teams and the business, in the same room.

More delegation

Decisions moved to the people closest to the work.

The whole Customer Service team met the full Engineering team.

Customer Service × Engineering

Leaders now spend more of their time in the room with the work.

What I’m asking of my teams now

1. **Managers lead the way**

   Build with the team. A manager who can’t demo the product can’t lead this work.

2. **Schedule collaboration**

   Put collaboration time with the business on the calendar, and end it with a demo.

3. **Order the feedback**

   Sort what you hear by impact, then ask the questions that get to the real need.

4. **Be context amplifiers**

   Give your team the whole picture so they can make good calls without waiting on you.

“I’ll get back to you in two weeks” is the red flag — two weeks with no learning in them.

What I need help with

Organization and team topology

Volunteers don’t scale, and product and tech are now one team. What structure keeps this going?

Celebrating creativity while holding to engineering excellence

How do we reward fast experiments and still keep the quality bar high?

Navigating the choppy waters of change

We’re all living through this shift. How are you helping your people through it?

If you’ve solved any of these, find me at the break.

The emergency showed us what was possible.

Now we're learning to work that way without needing an emergency.



Dustin Warner | Director of Software Engineering, NRC Health

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