Why Your Software Development Organization Can't Get Sh*t Done, And What to Do About It

Michael Cinquino (00:00)
Welcome everyone to episode two of Ascendle Unscripted. I'm Michael Cinquino. I'll be your host. Today we have Dave Todaro, Founder and CEO of Ascendle. Dave, thanks so much for joining us on the show.

Dave Todaro (00:14)
Thank you, Michael. I'm excited to be here.

Michael Cinquino (00:17)
So, I usually don't do this. I usually dive right into questions. But I would love if you just gave us a little context about you and who you are. And then I think that'll be a nice kind of springboard into who Ascendle is and what the team at Ascendle does.

Dave Todaro (00:31)
Sure, absolutely. So, my background's in computers. I was lucky enough to have a grade school teacher who brought a computer into the classroom, which was pretty unusual back in those days. I won't tell you how long ago that was, but that was a few years ago, Michael. Fell in love, started programming when I was a kid, and then my father was a director of an overnight camp at the Boston YMCA. And I would watch him sort of pounding away at the three-part forum on his typewriter on the dining room table and I thought there must be a better way to do this. So I, of course, whipped up a little database program for him and the dot matrix printer and he was off and running.

Michael Cinquino (01:09)
So just whipped up a database program for me. So just to kind of go a little bit deeper on that for a second, your skills around that, were those something that you learned in school up until that point? I mean, there really wasn't an internet at the time. So whatever information you had to have…

Dave Todaro (01:11)
I didn't have much of a social life back then, Michael.

Michael Cinquino (01:34)
Was passed down to your library like what was what was learning like in that era?

Dave Todaro (01:38)
That's a very good question. It was definitely very pre-internet. There were computer magazines around. I had my trusty Commodore 64 with the Associated magazine. But it was lot of just figuring it out on your own. So every day after school, I would come home and bang away at the computer and just try to figure things out. And that's how I ended up building that program for my father.

Michael Cinquino (02:03)
Did you have a mentor or anyone like that at the time aside from having to kind of just make the repetitions and figure it out trial and error?

Dave Todaro (02:10)
Really just my grade school teacher, fifth and sixth grade. I would go to her for help with programming early on, but then it was just figuring it out as I went.

Michael Cinquino (02:21)
This is your story, but I want to ask you about her because at that time, she was very far ahead of her time, obviously. What do you think inspired that in her? Because if she, because it sounds like if she didn't, if she wasn't inspired by that, your path might have been a little bit different.

Dave Todaro (02:27)
Absolutely.
I was very lucky. She was very visionary. There was no computer in the classroom. This was a TRS-80 Model 3 for those of you who might be really old like me. So yeah, I don't know where she figured out where to find the money for her computer. I'm sure it was very expensive back then. But she just had it sitting in the corner and she encouraged us to play around with it. And she taught me how to program.

Michael Cinquino (03:00)
Wow, I had a visionary, my own experience when I was younger. I wish I can say that my handwriting is better now, but it's not. My handwriting was absolutely awful when I was learning handwriting. And they took me to somebody kind of like a handwriting expert type of person. He's like, don't worry about it. He's like, by the time Michael goes to college, he's like, everything's going to be on a word processor on computers. And at the time, it wasn't. It was still like IBM Wheel Rider typewriters and stuff like that. So I get like you, this is visionary of like, don't worry about it. No one was using word processor. So, I don't know where he got that, but that was definitely something that I kind of related to hearing about your teacher.

Dave Todaro (03:38)
Sounds like we were both pretty lucky.

ASCENDLE

Michael Cinquino (03:39)
We were very lucky. So that was if that was the Genesis, what you know, can you kind of take me through your your path leading up to Ascendle? And then I would love to hear from from the CEO, you know what Ascendle is and how you share your mission.

Dave Todaro (03:55)
Sure. So throughout high school, I continued on that path. I wrote a few more camper registration systems for the Boston YMCA, went to school for electrical and computer engineering. And then I graduated and I connected with a gentleman who had just started a software company and I became his technical co-founder. So, we built that company. It was construction estimating software for big projects, roads, highways, bridges, anywhere from tens of millions to billion dollar plus.
And that's really where I learned to build software that absolutely had to work. They had razor thin margins. So, if we were off even by dollars, that would be a really big deal.

Michael Cinquino (04:28)
Mmm.
Now, I know this isn't, we're not really talking about sales here, but I have a very particular question for you because you're talking about this. So being someone that's designing software to solve for a business problem, I would be willing to bet that the folks you went to with this software didn't wake up in the middle of the night going, we need a software program. This is going to fix everything. So, I guess the question I have for you that I think could be helpful for any audience member is how did you make the connection for the client who probably wasn't thinking about your solution?

Dave Todaro (05:07)
Yeah, that's a good observation. This was back in the 90s. There was no package software that was as popular as today. In fact, we used to say our number one competitor was Microsoft Excel. They had these huge spreadsheets. Just imagine bidding a billion dollars worth of work using an Excel spreadsheet. Was just a nightmare. So, our big selling point was that what if you make a small error in that spreadsheet?
And again, these were razor thin margins. So, if they were off by even a fraction of a percent, that could cost them profit. So, they could be doing a job for two or three years and making no money all the way along. So, what we used to say is the estimate is a forecast for profit. So, if you mess that up, you're not going to make any money.

Michael Cinquino (05:57)
Hmm. And was that your kind of value proposition for that company? Because this is, a know, and we're about to dive into Ascendle. You know, Ascendle focuses on solving real business problems. Is that, you know, is that how you made that connection for that client?

Dave Todaro (06:12)
Absolutely. Over those 18 years, I really learned that it's not about technology. It's about what problem are we actually solving? And that's when customers will spend money, is to solve a

ASCENDLE

problem. And if you don't tie that money that they're spending into an ROI, it's just not going to work.

Michael Cinquino (06:31)
That brings us to Ascendle. Yeah, so could you talk to us, some folks might know about Ascendle, be familiar with the company, many may not be. Could you share with us from the CEO and Founder, what is Ascendle? Who are you guys?

Dave Todaro (06:46)
Yeah, so at that software company, I learned a lot over those 18 years. I made a ton of mistakes. I had a full head of hair back then, It didn't last.

Michael Cinquino (06:54)
And you're like, my brothers all do. So, it's really my career path.

Dave Todaro (06:58)
Exactly. So, I learned a lot of lessons the hard way and really understood over time that this was not technology for technology sake. It's technology to solve a business problem. And it was really frustrating. It's really difficult to build good software. So, I sold to my partner and started Ascendle with the charter of I want to take everything that I've learned.

And I want to bring that to other software leaders who are probably to some degree frustrated about this thorny problem of building software.

Michael Cinquino (07:31)
Hmm.
This brings us to a rather provocative title for this particular episode of Ascendle Unscripted. Can you talk to us about getting shit done and why you chose that particular episode for, or title I should say, for this particular episode?

Dave Todaro (07:43)
Yeah, good question. So a little bit of a click baity title, but it was rooted in a real conversation that I had. So, I had been working with a COO from a software company, one of our clients and chatting with him over the course of a few months. And we went out to lunch and he was pretty frustrated. And he said that to me, Dave, why can't my teams just get shit done? Why is this so hard? So that was the origin of that title.

Michael Cinquino (08:16)
What was going on for him? Rather, guess the better question is, what do think he meant by that specifically? Because, you know, shit and done can accomplish, can encompass a wide variety of topics. Did you get to specifically further in the conversation what specifically he meant?

Dave Todaro (08:32)
Yeah, so I dug a little bit deeper and it really boiled down to over time, some combination of three different things. He was either frustrated because the functionality the teams were building wasn't exactly aligned with what customers needed or where they wanted to go to get into some new markets. It was very unpredictable. He went up one side and down the other trying to figure out when is this going to be done? And it was the old joke that I took what they estimated, I added three months and I doubled it because they just couldn't quite figure out how to tell me when it would be done. And then when they did get it into market, the quality was not where it needed to be. So, customers would be frustrated with the bugs. They would break things that previously worked. They would bring back bugs that they had previously fixed. And so, he was understandably pulling his hair out. And as I talked to more people, I found that these three themes were pretty common. Building the right product, building it predictably and at the right level of quality.

Michael Cinquino (09:34)
So, after hearing that from him, did you give him advice? If so, what was the advice that you gave him?

Dave Todaro (09:38)
I did. So, the team was building in two week iterations, which most contemporary teams build in one week to a calendar month with two weeks being the most popular. And they were reviewing their progress. And I asked him, well, when you go to those reviews every two weeks, what are you seeing? Are you hearing anything? Are you seeing things? What do you think's at the root of this? And he said, well, I went to the first couple, but I haven't really been attending. I said, well, let's start with step one. Start attending those reviews again, because that's your insight into what the team is doing. And so that was assignment number one for him.

Michael Cinquino (10:16)
Okay, so as a creative myself, we talk a lot about showing up. Just show up. I would say in your line of work though, that might seem a little simple. So, is the advice really that you gave him to show up?

Dave Todaro (10:30)
It really was, say 90 % of life is just showing up. But by showing up to those reviews, it really gave him three things. One is just visibility, visibility into what exactly was going on in terms of what's the team working on, what are they producing, that's really ready to go, are they having trouble. And that gave him the second piece, which was insight. So, by talking to the team directly, hearing from the those on the front lines, so to speak, who is writing the software every day. He could gain some insight. And then the other thing is it drove accountability. It's not that his team was slacking off. It's just that he was able to close the loop. When the product folks were figuring out what needed to be built, he could identify, they're not actually communicating very well with the development team. Of course, they're not building the right

thing because there's a communication breakdown. So those three things are what he was able to get, the visibility, insight and accountability.

Michael Cinquino (11:32)
Good things come in threes. So, diving a little bit deeper on the problem, what more specifically was getting in the team's way?

Dave Todaro (11:38)
Well, there were a few different examples. One time the team said, well, we need this tool. And this tool is going to help them do things faster. And he said, well, have you told anybody about this? And they said, yeah, well, we've made some noise about it. And we asked about it. And we just didn't get approval to buy it. And he said, well, how much does it cost? And they said, $2,000. Now mind you, they were working on a project which was going to unlock another $6 or $7 million a year in revenue.
So $2,000 was nothing, but they kind of got caught up in the budget cycle and there is no $2,000 line item that we can use. He said, go buy it. I'll give you my credit card. That's just one example of where, because he was able to understand what was going on, he could remove that barrier. It wasn't that the people that were going to ask for those $2,000 was doing anything wrong, but he could leverage his power to overcome that. Really was a perfect example of servant leadership.

Michael Cinquino (12:41)
So from a timeline perspective, that was one obstacle. Were there any other obstacles beyond them, thinking that, $2,000 is, well, we should really think about that when it's like, well, wait, not having a leader come in with that context. Were there any other things in the team's way that he noticed when he was showing up every two weeks that he was able to gather?

Dave Todaro (13:04)
Yeah, that was an easy example, giving them a credit card. And if all problems were that easy to solve, that would be nice. As we dug in, and we helped him dig in a little bit and identify what was going on, and there's three different areas that we see are critical with any team. One is the product side, figuring out what is it that we need to build and conveying that vision into the team. The second one is technology, making sure that we're…

Michael Cinquino (13:06)
Yeah.

Dave Todaro (13:31)
Building the product right. Building the right product is product, building the product right is technology. And then finally process, making sure we are not only using the best process for us, but continuously improving. And there were some weaknesses in that area. On the technical side, the team didn't really have the technical chops to be able to do what they needed. So, we helped bring in some more experienced folks from within the company.

And their process was OK, but they really weren't doing that continuous improvement piece. They weren't stopping every couple of weeks and thinking, how can we do this better? So we helped drive that. And as I mentioned earlier, there was a little communication issue between product and the team in terms of understanding what it was that we needed to get done.

Michael Cinquino (14:18)
So, product technology and process, if we were to highlight those, that's what they would be.

Dave Todaro (14:23)
Absolutely.

Michael Cinquino (14:25)
Now, I'm going to assume that this story has a somewhat of a happy ending, at least, or maybe not. So, did you speak to him later on? If so, what was or were the outcomes?

Dave Todaro (14:30)
Yeah, the good news is it was a fairy tale ending. Now it wasn't overnight. We weren't able to snap our fingers and just make a bunch of changes. But over time, it took, I think, about three to six months for that process and that team to really come up to speed. But they were great outcomes. Everyone was in much better spirits. They were getting things done. They had increased their release tempo.
Quality had gone up and customers were happier and they were driving against that $6 million revenue goal.

Michael Cinquino (15:08)
If we were to summarize just at this point what we have talked about so far, could you do that for us before we maybe hop onto another question or two?

Dave Todaro (15:18)
Yeah, absolutely. And this is going to be a gross simplification, but I really think that these are the key points. First is show up. Show up and don't just sit there and kind of get a presentation, but have a discussion. Ask questions of the team. Now, it sounds like you guys got stuck on that. What do you think was the cause of that? Now, the team early on might be a little intimidated because here's the big wig coming in and asking questions, but.

What I've seen is over time, the team understands that you are, in fact, there to help. And that comes into the second part, which is when you hear about these problems and learn about them, see what you can do to help remove obstacles in that servant leadership mode. And then make sure you have those three key roles supported on the team. Product, technology and process, making sure that there's someone with experience in all three of those areas. And I think that if you do those things, then I think you'll see the teams speeding up and delivering better outcomes.

ASCENDLE

Michael Cinquino (16:23)
So to summarize even further, maybe say even oversimplify even further, one, show up, two, listen, three, make sure there are folks in those three strategic roles or owning those. Awesome.

Dave Todaro (16:33)
Absolutely. Yep.

Michael Cinquino (16:46)
We've talked about showing up. What do you think in your observation, before we maybe look at another question or two. What do you think is the biggest obstacle or maybe the most common obstacle to showing up? Is it just not understanding that it's necessary or not a priority? What you know have you observed and maybe there isn't a common theme maybe they're all different. I'm just curious if there is a common theme.

Dave Todaro (17:02)
I think what happens a lot of times is leaders assume that those reviews are for the engineering team. And sometimes the teams can get themselves into trouble because they make those reviews highly technical and they're looking at code and they really should focus more on the stakeholder. I like to say that those sprint reviews are primarily for the stakeholder. Now, they're both for the stakeholder and the team. But if we think about catering to the stakeholders, we're going to get better outcomes as a team.
So I think that may be one of the barriers is that senior leader or stakeholder shows up. It's all kind of technical gibberish and I don't really actually understand what's going on. And I guess I'm going to leave these folks alone because this is the technical stuff. So once the teams realize that they need to cater to the stakeholders and the stakeholders realize they really need to show up to inspect the work at that level, I think that change can happen. I think the other barrier

to senior stakeholders showing up is they're just simply busy. And that's another aspect where the team can cater a little bit to the stakeholders, figure out if they can adjust their schedule a little bit so those senior leaders can in fact show up. But it does take commitment on behalf of the senior leader. We worked with one client. We did a two-year engagement with them. And I sat down with the CEO and I said, "There's one critical success factor. That If you don't do this, it's highly likely this project will go off the rails." And he said, "What is that?" I said, "Just show up to the reviews every two weeks." And he did. For two years, he showed up. He contributed. He gained insight. He helped remove barriers. He put the appropriate pressure in terms of what the other areas of the organization needed to do. And that team just thrived, and they produced amazing outcomes.
So, another part of it is just someone telling that leader that they do, in fact, need to show up if they have a vested interest in that outcome. And for especially the most important projects that are driving revenue goals, what more important thing should I be focusing on except helping to support that team?

ASCENDLE

Michael Cinquino (19:11)
So, you just finished with the question there, Dave. I believe that questions are the key to kind of maintaining persistency and consistency. So, if we could, we talked about a whole bunch of stuff. I'd love to close this out by maybe offering up some questions that leaders can ask themselves, maybe every two weeks or whatever the pacing or the cadence you think might be. What are those questions that they can be asking themselves in the form of, am I blank? To make sure not necessarily that they're checking boxes, but to make sure that they're staying consistent in actions that are going to be beneficial for the long-term health of the project or whatever project they're working on.

Dave Todaro (19:49)
Yeah, think the first question is, do I actually understand the real status of this development effort? And to me, the only status that really matters is usable software. So that leads to another question, which is, have I been using the software, at least occasionally? It doesn't mean that the senior stakeholders need to go and dissect the software. But are they able to get access after each of those, let's just say, two week iterations, are they getting access to the software? Can they take a look at it or at least get a walk through, maybe attend a sales demo or a salesperson is demonstrating the new version to a prospect? And are they in fact in tune with where this stands? Because what I've seen on projects really go off the rails, and I could tell you some nightmare stories. One client spent over $10 million and had to throw it all away because they simply weren't getting something usable every two weeks. Nine months went by. It was all promises. It was all hearts and flowers. It's going to be great. $13-plus million later, they finally got it. It was completely wrong, both on the technical side and the functionality side. They threw it all away and started over.

Michael Cinquino (21:03)
That has to hurt.

Dave Todaro (21:05)
That was a really bad one. That's the worst one that I've heard of, luckily.

Michael Cinquino (21:09)
Thank you for those questions. Are there any other questions that you might compel folks to ask?

Dave Todaro (21:14)
I think there's other questions you can ask during those reviews, which is, what is standing in your way? And even, is there anything that I can do to help? And again, early on when you first start attending those reviews, there might be a little bit of your star power at work. But again, keep asking those questions. And not only within those reviews, but outside of those reviews, ask your leadership team. So, I heard this on that review and that made me think this, tell me more about that. Should I be concerned about that? And that's part of the accountability is seeing from the boots on the ground perspective. What's going on? Hearing from the team members, the struggles that they're facing, and then holding your leadership team

ASCENDLE

accountable for ensuring that they have the support that they need. Meaning the teams have the support from leadership that they need and drive that servant leadership down all the way to the individual contributor level.

Michael Cinquino (22:10)
It sounds like also the one of the many benefits of showing up is that when we show up consistently, we build trust. And it sounds like what I'm getting from you, Dave, is that the more a leader can show up consistently and listen with the intent to understand, the more information they're going to wind up getting because the team's going to feel safer sharing things that might not be working.

Dave Todaro (22:18)
Absolutely.

Michael Cinquino (22:39)
Whereas if they haven't built that level of trust, they're really not going to get access to the nitty gritty. What's really, the question of what's really going on here is I think an important question. Do you agree that that consistency and the trust builds as you continue to show up and that listening to understand is something that's important to do?

Dave Todaro (22:58)
I totally agree with that. And that matches my experience as I've seen this happening over time. It really feels like the team members down to the individual contributor and the senior stakeholder really start to level out. And it turns into us as opposed to us versus them. There's another really interesting thing I've observed in those reviews is when the senior leader comes and their leaders come as well. They end up having conversations about this product development. And I'm kind of sitting back thinking, it's a little strange that they haven't been having these conversations. But then what I realized is that these reviews and the product act as a catalyst for having these conversations. So, the products that they're looking at sort of forms a canvas or a backdrop, which then informs these conversations that they're having with each other.
So, this is the stakeholders talking to other stakeholders. "Hey, why are we doing that thing? Like that sounds like it's going to be pretty hard." "Well, we had talked about doing this thing for over here. You know what? Let's talk about that offline because I'm not really sure. Now that I see it and we're having this conversation, I'm not really sure that's the best thing to do." And by forcing that canvas of the backdrop of the product, we have these conversations and we can actually accelerate time to market because what we thought we actually needed to build when we see it in context and we have these conversations with each other, we can make decisions to just scrap some things or push them off until later, and we can accelerate revenue.

Michael Cinquino (24:33)
Thank you for that. The question next is, I know the answer to, but I'm going to ask the question anyway. We did, because we talked about it before you hopped on, folks can reach

out to you. So, one of the things, so can folks reach out to you? I know the answer to that is yes, because we talked about it. And I want to share something here to make it easy for folks to do that.

So, I want to highlight the reason why you'd want to connect with Dave. Dave's got a few slots for 15 minute calls. And while principles always apply, that means the principles that we've talked about on this call always apply, everyone's situation, every organization's situation is bespoke. And that's why I would compel someone to reach out and speak.

That's my two cents. And whatever point, not only is the organization an entity unto itself, the time and space you might be at within a project or in the lifespan of something is also very, very unique. And the only way to really know how these things match up is to have a conversation. That's my pitch on why folks should reach out to you. And you can scan the QR code. You can screenshot this. There's also going to be a link below that you can click on to schedule a call with Dave. Dave, do you have anything to add about reaching out to speak to you?

Dave Todaro (25:56)
Well, as you can probably tell, I really love helping, specifically in this oftentimes struggle of building products that are going to generate revenue. And I love having conversations any way I can possibly help, more than happy to do that. And even if it's just validating, "Hey, we're thinking of doing this thing. Does that sound right?" Or "Dave, I'm really struggling with this. Do you have any ideas?" More than happy to help anybody and everybody.

Michael Cinquino (26:23)
Dave, thanks so much for hopping on the show today. Any parting thoughts or words?

Dave Todaro (26:28)
Software is really hard, but with some deliberate effort and putting all the heads together and making sure you have those key roles, it can work and it can drive those revenue outcomes. And really appreciated being on the show today.

Michael Cinquino (26:45)
Great to have you. Dave Todaro, CEO and founder of Ascendle. Thanks for joining. Next episode of Ascendle Unscripted is going to be The AI Impact, A Revolution Worth Your Attention?, which is a question mark at the end of that. So, I'm looking forward to hearing your team talk on AI because we all know it's a very, very big topic. And any distinctions we can make, I think, around AI are going to be helpful for organizations.

Thanks again, Dave, and we'll see you on the next episode of Ascendle Unscripted.

Dave Todaro (27:18)
Thank you, Michael.

ASCENDLE