

Operational Mindset For Organizational Effectiveness With Alpana Prabhu

Introduction

[0:16] Jessica Ly: Welcome to Take It Up with Jessica Lee.

I'm with Alpana Prabhu, Director of Operations at ServiceNow, specifically for the Customer Service Management product. I know this is relatively new—about a three-year-old product.

[0:31] Alpana Prabhu: That is correct.

[0:32] Jessica: ServiceNow, of course, is well known for ITSM. Could you tell us a little about this new unit?

[0:40] Alpana: Not so new anymore.

It was incubated three years ago at our flagship conference, Knowledge, in May 2016. I joined ServiceNow in July, actually for a different role.

For the first time in my career, within three days, I was told, "Okay, you get to be in operations for this newly formed business unit, Customer Service Management."

And I thought, "All right, let's do it."

I loved it. I still love it.

[1:37] Jessica: What do you do in operations? What does that mean?

Section 1: Building the Operational Foundation for Product Growth

[1:38] Alpana: I look at operations as the wind beneath the wings. You enable everybody tied to the product, set them up for success, and ensure the operating rhythm and momentum of the business unit are maintained.

What does that translate to tactically?

To bring a product to market, there are several things that need to be done. First and foremost, you must have a product. You need to know who the product is serving. Who are your customers? Who will want to buy it, and who are you building it for?

You also need people to sell the product. Are they equipped to sell it? Are they enabled in the right manner?

If there's a product, it needs to be implemented. Are your implementers enabled to implement the product?

The content and enablement of all the people who bring your product to market is a vital part of the process.

[2:37] Jessica: So, do you create the content, like product knowledge?

Alpana: I don't personally create the content. There are product managers who do, and there are product marketing teams who do.

That content then flows down to our core sellers, partners who sell for us, implementers, and partners who implement for us.

[2:58] Jessica: Do you handle the piloting or proof of concept for the product from the operations side? How involved are you in running that process?

Alpana: No. There are people who implement the product and work with customers on proof of concept.

It depends on the customer's use case. Why are you buying this product? This is what the product does, but you're buying it to achieve a particular business outcome.

We have people who work with partners, as well as our own professional services

organization, which is called Customer Outcomes today. They take the product to customers and implement it for their specific use case.

[3:32] From an operations perspective, my role focuses on the underlying infrastructure and customer data. Who are our customers? What are the timelines for implementation? All of that data needs to sit within our systems.

My team works closely with IT to automate that and enable our product success teams and other customer-facing teams to update our customer database, because we must know who our customers are.

It's very important to know who your customer is.

[4:09] Jessica: How are they using it?

Alpana: It's very important to know how they're using it, because that tells you whether they're going to continue using it.

Are they using it in the right manner? That's the other thing. How can we mature their usage of the product?

[4:24] Jessica: Because they've invested heavily in it, and because it's a SaaS product, you're able to see what's happening.

Alpana: Yes. For customers who give us access to their usage data, we're able to see what's happening, and that data feeds the teams who interact with customers.

If I'm a seller going back to a customer, I should be equipped with an understanding of the customer landscape and what the data is telling me so I can have meaningful conversations with that customer.

[4:52] Jessica: So you're helping them become more successful through the insights you're gathering and feeding back.

[5:01] Alpana: The first thing I asked when I joined this team was, "Where's the data?"

To me, data is king, queen—whatever you want to call it. It is what it is, and it's incredibly rich.

It's about getting insights not just from usage data, but also from business data. Who are you selling to?

As a new business unit evolves, you start seeing patterns in who's buying, and then you start evolving your strategy as well. Data feeds strategy. Data insights feed strategy.

It enables us to focus on which business segments we want to pursue, identify our sweet spots, and start targeting those areas. Especially when you're planning three-year models for your business, that data really helps.

[5:51] From an operations perspective, I hold the data infrastructure for the product. My team also handles release program management.

I sit within the product organization, and I have people on my team who enable and help product managers manage product releases.

There are a lot of cross-functional touchpoints in operations, both within the product organization and outside it.

[6:19] One of the key things I've done in my role is build very strong relationships with my cross-functional operational counterparts—Sales Operations, Marketing Operations, Financial Planning and Analysis, our professional services or Customer Outcomes organization, and Channel Operations.

When you sit in a business operations role, you straddle the organization end to end. But there are vertical functional organizations with their own remits, and sometimes there's overlap.

You have to build strong relationships so you don't focus on the overlap as much as ensuring everybody does their part.

There's no need to reinvent the wheel when people already have their full remit. You partner with them.

Collaborating and partnering with your operational counterparts is very important. It saves a lot of time.

[7:12] Jessica: It sounds like you have a lot of lessons learned that you can share.

Alpana: A lot, a lot, a lot of lessons learned. I'll give you that.

Jessica: Good lessons learned.

Section 2: Designing Your Own Path to Operations Leadership

[8:01] Alpana: I loved coding. "Hello, World!" Kernighan and Ritchie—my God, iconic.

One thing led to another, and I found I had a penchant for analyzing. Soon enough, that led to leading large programs and transformational initiatives.

I enjoy stitching things together and connecting the dots. I don't know if you played that game in kindergarten where you get dots and connect them without taking the pen off the paper. Who would have thought that activity would still be relevant today? From a different perspective, of course.

Everything I learned while working across different programs was very domain-enriching because it wasn't limited to just one vertical. I worked across multiple verticals, including healthcare for almost five years when I was in Chicago.

Like I said, one thing led to another, and then the question became: What do I want to evolve into?

Operations seemed like the natural path. I thought about an MBA, but life's priorities took over. The urge and the desire were still very strong, so I asked myself, "What can I do differently instead of investing in a traditional MBA program?"

I started earmarking topics that I thought would help me on my path into operations.

[9:24] I would say I got lucky because the right course came along at the right time. One was Agile Business Modeling and Investments, taught through Stanford.

It was one of the most compelling and hands-on courses I've ever taken. I was on a short break between two jobs at the time, and I'm grateful for that time off. The intensity and the way the course was taught were just amazing.

The practical application was: How do you model a business so that people want to invest in it?

It was one of the best courses I've ever taken.

The other was go-to-market. If you work in operations, you must know how to take a product or service to market. Again, Stanford. Thank you, Stanford.

[10:13] Jessica: So anyone can sign up for these classes? You don't need to be in an MBA program?

Alpana: No, you don't.

IoT also caught my interest, and so does blockchain. I still have to explore that because this is where the future is—or it's already happening as we speak.

Devices are talking and collecting data. Again, the best four-letter word these days: data.

I took that course to learn more about the IoT space.

[11:50] Jessica: I think, for a variety of reasons, not everybody can be in an MBA program. But learning is available online. You can pick and choose the things you think will help you work toward your goal.

First, you have to have a goal, and you had one. You knew you wanted to be in operations, so you chose the classes that would help you take that path.

[12:17] Alpana: The other thing I did was take a storytelling course with another company in the Bay Area.

How do you communicate through the mechanics of a story?

That's very important because when you work in operations, it can sometimes get very dry. There's a lot of data. But how do you tell the story?

Jessica: Yes, that's very important too. Make it engaging.

Alpana: Make it engaging, make it fun, and make it relatable.

I took that course as well. The journey continues. It doesn't stop, and there will be many more courses.

So yes, I've been having fun designing my own little MBA program.

12:56

Jessica: Right. Excellent.

It's good for the audience to hear the story of the path you took. How is it going? Do you think it has opened up opportunities for you?

[13:09] Alpana: It's broadened and widened my perspective. It will open opportunities for me.

Section 3: Customer-First Culture and the Power of Servant Leadership

[13:18] Jessica: ServiceNow is a great company.

Alpana: Yes. When I joined, we were 5,000 people strong. Now, we're more than 8,000 and continuing to grow, so I expect there to be more opportunities.

When I look at where we were when I joined three years ago and where we are now, that's about 1,000 more employees per year.

Jessica: It's a very strong, growing company. What is the culture like?

[14:40] Alpana: When you walk in, your employee experience is fabulous.

Jessica: It helps you be more productive, right?

Alpana: More productive. You're focused on your outcome rather than the little things and noise you shouldn't have to worry about.

Every company has customers. You're there because you have a product or service to serve someone.



Customer service is about brand loyalty. You're working with customers to build that. To serve your customer, you need a product that helps your agents and teams provide customer service.

When we say customer service, we don't say it's one person's job or one team's job. We say it's every department in the company. It's everyone's job to be in that customer service mode.

The Customer Service Management product I work for enables companies to do that.

[15:31] As you said, our flagship product is IT Service Management. Every company has an IT department, right? They spend their time managing backend infrastructure and the business systems they put in place for employees.

How do you make their lives easier so they can better serve internal employees? That's where our flagship IT products come in.

When we say we make work better, we really mean it.

When you look at ServiceNow and understand why it's growing at the scale it is, it makes total sense.

[16:11] Coming back to your question on culture, it's a very customer-first culture.

I like what our CEO says about staying humble and hungry. That's very important. You need to have fire in the

belly, but humility is also a much-admired trait.

And we need to have purpose in what we do. Those are the things that mark us, and I really appreciate that.

[16:37] Jessica: That's powerful—humble, hungry, and purpose.

Alpana: Purpose.

The other thing he talks about is servant leadership. I love that.

I tell my team that we spend the bulk of our day with people who aren't our family. They become your professional family.

It's important that we have fun, that we're at ease, and that we feel we're in a safe environment where we can be our authentic selves.

Section 4: Why Different Thinking Makes Teams Stronger

[17:50] Alpana: When you say diversity and inclusion, it often leans toward gender diversity, different lifestyle preferences, ethnic diversity, or economic backgrounds.

For me, it's about diversity in how people think.

When I look at onboarding someone onto my team, it matters to me how you think and how differently you think. There's something to be said for people who don't agree with you.

I think it's extremely powerful because it sparks conversations.



You have to listen, though. When you do, both people take something away from the conversation. The purpose isn't to convert someone with a different thought process to your way of thinking. You leave with something to reflect on.

To me, that's diversity of thought—everybody thinking differently and bringing their perspectives to the table. They're not afraid to voice them.

When you leave the conversation, you've agreed on something in common, but you've also each contributed something of your own.

There's something to be said for everybody thinking alike. It builds a sense of comfort.

But there's also a lot to be said for discomfort. Discomfort pushes you forward.

[19:08] Jessica: Yes. I agree with you on that.

Section 5: Growing Through Responsibility, Not Titles

[19:11] Jessica: So, what's exciting for you? What's ahead that you're really aiming to achieve?

[19:17] Alpana: I intend to continue growing on the path of operations. If you ask me about a dream role, I definitely want to head operations.

The bigger the responsibility, the better.

I don't like talking in terms of titles because a title is an outcome.

When I see people in C-level roles, I see the burden they bear, which means they're capable of bearing it.

For me, it's about the span of responsibility. How much more can I do with what I know, and how much more can I give to a team or an organization?

And are you willing to take it? I may want the responsibility, but am I willing to take it?

[20:07] I remember a conversation from a long time ago when I said, "We're all diamonds. Each of us is a diamond, and we have different facets. It's up to the jeweler to put us in the right setting."

So, let's see where this path goes.

[20:29] Jessica: Well, I see brightness ahead for you—and for all of us.

[20:35] Jessica: It's been wonderful to have you here and hear about your journey and the path that brought you to where you are today.

Thanks for watching Take It Up with Jessica Lee. Alpana from ServiceNow, thank you.

[20:45] Alpana: Thank you. This was fun, and thank you for having me here. I appreciate the opportunity.

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