Managing Expectations: Exploring the emotional side of building platforms

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In 2018/19, when Datadog was a startup, operating in **1 region**, with roughly **500 workloads** and **250 engineers** shipping code

We made a **bold** business **decision** to build a **new region**, entirely with Kubernetes

Assembled a **tiger team** focused on this new region and saw **massive successes** early on

Eventually became **the infrastructure** team at Datadog

Next, the aim was to make this work across **all existing** and **new regions**

The Evolving Scope of our Challenge

In 2020, we **faced the need** to launch **two new** regions under **tight deadlines**

Then, COVID-19 hit …

80% year-over-year growth in both 2021 and 2022

By mid-2022, our engineering had grown to **1200+** engineers, **250+ teams**, **3000+ workloads** across 4 **regions**, deploying **thousands of changes** daily

Along the way, disconnect and distance grew as the scope expanded.

Product Teams

Rely on the platform to deliver features and solutions **directly to customers**.

Platform Teams

Focus on building the core **infrastructure**, **data** and **tools** that power the entire organization.

Divided opinions: Is this migration even necessary?

Skepticism: "Can the team building this really understand our needs?"

Teams voiced their needs as solutions: **"This is how it should be done"**

Underlying belief: **"We could probably do this better ourselves"**

Managing the intersection of growing technical demands and the **complexities of human behavior**

- **trust**
- **motivations**
- **ownership**

Let's Dive In …

Early **excitemen**t for the new deployment platform on Kubernetes

Initial **trust** built with early adopters—those who saw immediate benefits

Assumption: Success with a few teams would naturally extend to all

Reality: Trust was fragmented across teams, many remained skeptical

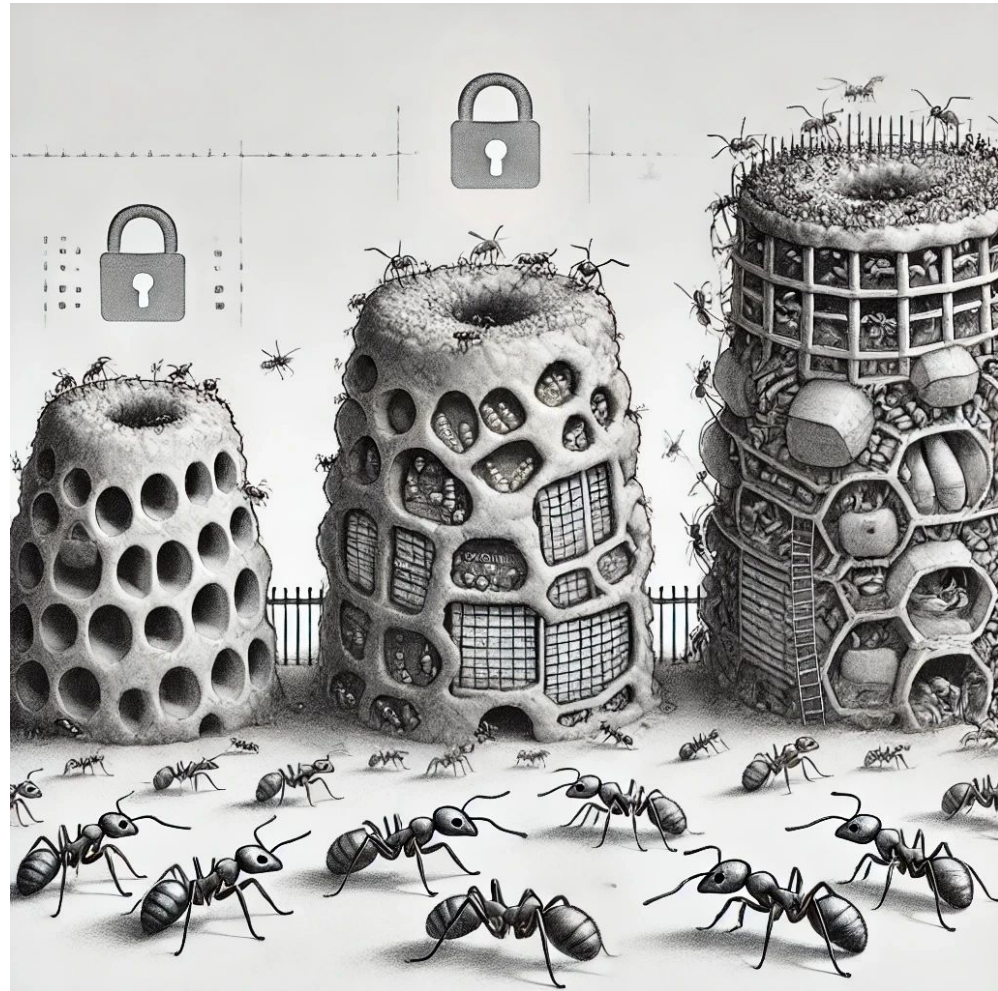This **fragile trust** was tested as we expanded the platform's scope

"Trust takes years to build, seconds to break, and forever to repair."

–Anonymous

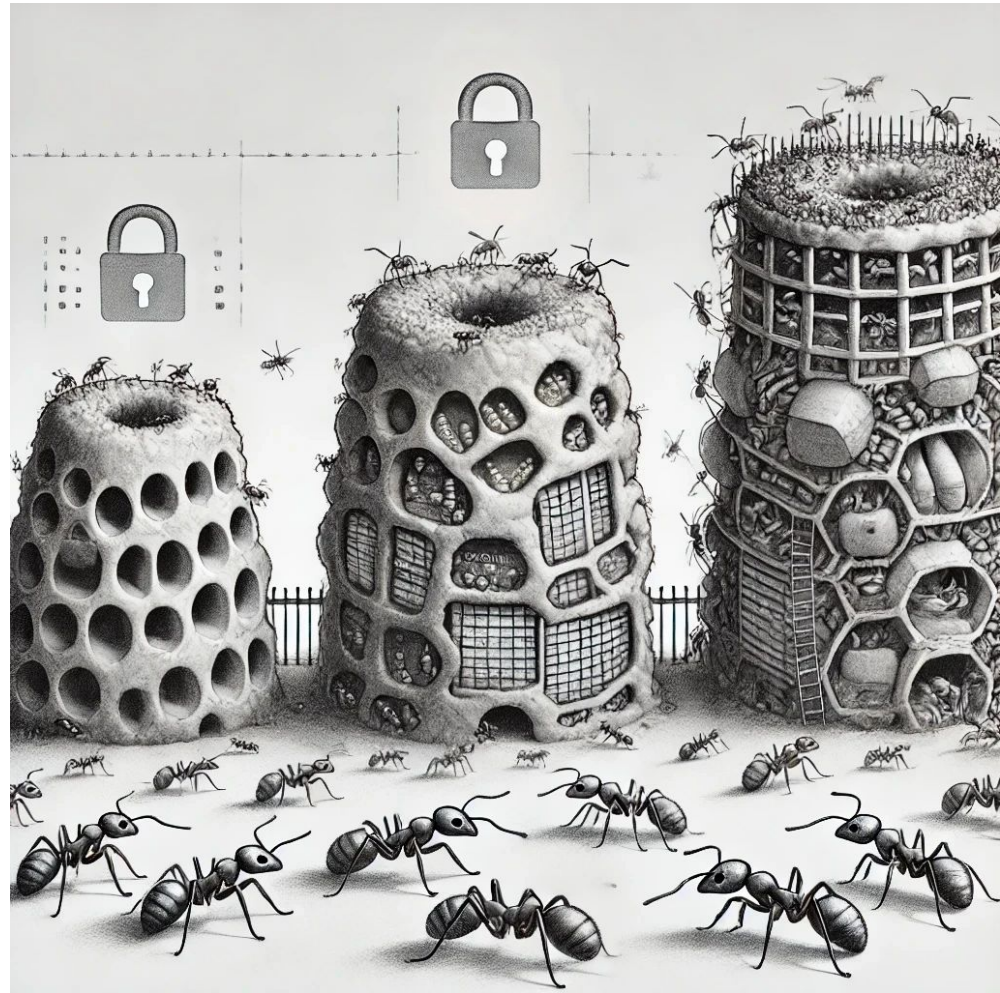**GovCloud region:** One of the two regions with tight deadlines in 2020

Opportunity: Momentum would easily translate to this low-volume environment

Reality:
Underestimated the Teams' Expectation for Consistency Across Regions

Teams felt they lost control—shifted from collaboration to feeling dictated

The rollout led to **eroding trust**, which had been carefully built until this point

To put it simply: We failed to **manage their expectations** of "how they wanted this migration to progress"

When One Size Doesn't Fit All

Critical Workloads in Main Region Refused to Move Without Proof

Stalemate Due to Lack of Engagement

Ownership – Inversion of Control

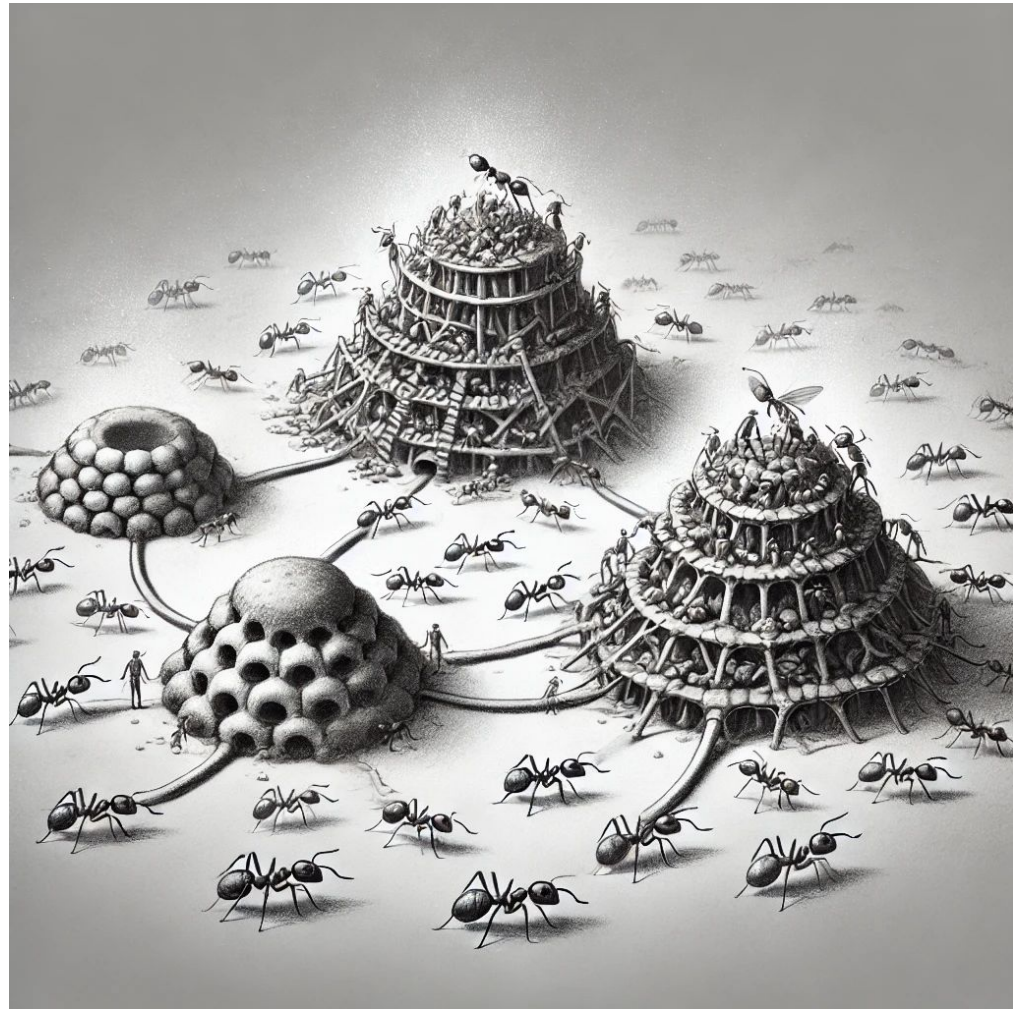Faced with Resistance, We Handed Over Control to the Teams

Some Teams used our foundations and adapted to their unique needs.

Some Teams Struggled with the Complexity, were **humbled** and **Returned for Collaboration**

These teams became **advocates** for the platform, creating a **network effect** across the organization

Lessons: Recap

Technical challenges can be anticipated; human reactions often cannot

People's **habits**, **fears**, and **motivations** shape the success of any project

Misaligned **expectations** and **trust** issues can derail even the best-laid plans

Engaging with teams on a **personal level** was as crucial as the technical work

- Start **small**
- Show early **wins**
- Build a **support** network
- Maintain **trust**

- Address resistance with **kindness**
- **Empower** teams with **ownership**
- Be **relentless** in **finishing**

These lessons shaped my approach in building **five new successful infrastructure platforms** at Datadog

Thank You!