

Worst Practices in Systems Management

By Gloria Seltzer

My first IT job was with a major multi-national oil company. Their systems management and development methodology was the result of analyzing the attributes of successful projects and implementing best practices. This article is dedicated to the best system managers I have worked with who avoid the following pitfalls, death marches or death traps.

1. The Emperor Has No Clothes

Project Sponsors who put their personal ego, ambition, recognition, advancement and monetary rewards above organization goals of client service and productivity improvement jeopardize the welfare of the organization and its employees. Examples are:

- Consciously understating the cost of projects to get them approved
- Receiving kickbacks from suppliers or vendors

- Lying about project status and progress to senior management
- Trivializing monumental challenges and risks
- Accusing team members of being lazy or stupid, to “pass the buck”
- Throwing good money after bad money

2. Dog Eat Dog

Project sponsors / managers who set unrealistic project goals to meet the unrealistic time lines and costs can only



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lead to shoddy work, poor morale, and lost business—as existing clients go to the competition for better service. They may think “I win / you lose,” but the end result is “Nobody wins / we all lose.”

3. My Way or the Highway

Project sponsors / managers who are dictators, micro-managers, or control freaks enslave the team into submission. Given the edict “ours is not to question why; ours is but to do or die,” team members do the minimum to survive, since they do not want their quality of work criticized or ridiculed.

4. Jump! How High?

Project sponsors / managers who constantly apply pressure and harassment tactics in the name of man-made crises such as reporting project schedules, budget and status reports to various committees, or obtaining sign-offs on project documents—create stress and tension for team members, who then adopt a “don’t sweat the petty things and don’t pet the sweaty things” attitude. After all, if everything is urgent, then nothing is urgent.

5. Chicken with its Head Cut Off

Project managers who lock the team in a room for weeks on end to come up with a master project schedule means that they do not understand the business / systems, nor are they blessed with the humility to consult with and learn from the team.

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



“Don’t WYSWYG me, Doc. When I agreed to the computer image of my facial procedures, it was never supposed to include the tool bar and pop-up ad.”

This only generates anger, frustration, and resentment from team members as their day-to-day work goes undone and critical production problems go unsolved.

6. Sacrificial Lamb to the Gods

Project sponsors who make scapegoats out of project managers when heavy-handed tactics do not work only leads to staff turnover, low morale, lost knowledge / time, poor quality of work and missed deadlines. Good people will not stay and bad people will not leave.

7. Penny Wise and Pound Foolish

Project sponsors who replace experienced / knowledgeable consultants with junior staff to save money and to “cook the books” should know that “a hamburger is no substitute for a steak” and you get what you pay for.

8. Ostrich’s Head in the Sand

Project sponsors / managers who live in their ivory towers ask, “Why is there no commitment to the project?” The Team has disengaged from the project because there is nothing in it for them except miles of misery. “The light is on but nobody’s home.”

9. Lessons Never Learned

Project sponsors who swear that “this is the xth time we are doing this project and it must be done come hell or high water” do not learn from their mistakes. They keep doing the same things and expect different results. There is no future, just the past happening over and over again. “To boldly go where nobody has gone before” only applies to Star Trek, as team members are not guinea pigs with which to be experimented in a laboratory.

Conclusion: I am sure most of you have experienced these dysfunctional management styles from leaders who are no doubt bullies with impressive titles, who coerce instead of persuade, and who think they are better than we are & know more than we do. I do not pretend to understand the psychology of bullies, but surely wish they were level 5 leaders instead. Quoting from **Helen Keller:** “The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision.” 

***Gloria Seltzer** holds Bachelor of Science and Master of Business Administration degrees from McGill University in Montreal, and a Certified Management Accountant designation. She has been in IT for over 30 years, as a Business Analyst and a Project Manager. Her current consulting assignment is with RBC Investments. She can be reached at Gloria.Seltzer@rbc.com.*

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