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MOTD
By Rob Kolstad

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Making Your Partner Be Right

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Over lunch at various conferences, my friend Dan Klein teaches me about "improv," the art of improvisational comedy. He tells me that one of the primary rules of improv is "Make your partner right." In the context of improv, this means that you accept your partner's lead and, hopefully in some constructive way, you amplify it. Imagine your partner suggesting that rain is imminent. Your response might be to open an (imaginary?) umbrella. This "makes your partner right."

I raise this topic because I think our industry (both the producers and administrators of software) exhibits very little of this "spirit of cooperation" that is demanded in the improv setting.

Consider this scenario: Your manager comes by to visit or invites you to a meeting. In the ensuing communication, it is learned that your institution is soon to merge with another institution. Ideally, this might lead to thoughts like:

"Oh boy, stable paychecks."
"Goodie; more bright people with whom to interact."
"Fabulous! Finally we will have sufficient resources to tackle the really big problems."

Regrettably, human nature and our culture being what it is, we're more likely to observe reactions like:

"Rats, more stupid managers."
"Oh no, now I'll be even more of a cog in a machine."
"These people have always been known to be bozos."

Now why is that?

I am absolutely sure that some of these sorts of negative reactions are cultural – both organizational and occupational. Organizationally, they were de rigeur in the past and are perpetuated as each new employee acquires the company or career culture. In the occupational context, I know that as a trained engineer I can spot problems a mile away. Unfortunately, I have as much trouble as anyone convincing management that the problems truly exist and that appropriate resources (funding) should be devoted to attacking them. So, I tend to react negatively when I don't think an idea's creator (or even announcer) has thought through the "big picture."

Is negativity just human nature? Is it a rational learned response/reaction to a long history of missed expectations in the engineering field?

Whatever it is, it is truly a pain if one believes that "vision" is important. Consider: "Let's have a conference on XXX." "Nah, no one will come." That sounds contrived, I know. Here's a real example I received an email last week from a 20 year old intern at a Large Computer Research Lab: He says in a meeting: "Let's go ahead and sort the ten PC prices in our program." They respond: "No, the database has optimized sorting algorithms. We don't want to rewrite the database. Besides, it will take a long time to sort the numbers."

Of course, sorting ten numbers is a submillisecond task. Amusingly, the note to me was entitled "I am working with idiots." As it turns out, he was, in fact, working with idiots, as near as I can figure.

Of course, those idiots had the same sort of cultural markers that we all seem to exhibit from time to time: "Let's not do it a new way, we know and understand the both the idiosyncrasies and complexities of the old way(s)." Sometimes, this is a valid response. In my friend's case, I think his mentors were a bit misinformed or inexperienced. (Another paragraph he wrote me notes that programs they write are supposed to avoid the use of constructors because ". . . it says right here in the textbook that constructors are slow.")

So I have a proposal for all of us. One of these days when the workload is no more stressful than usual and you feel like you have a slight excess of "good energy," give it a try. For that day, see if "making your partner righ" is a reasonable strategy. Support people's ideas with your own constructive suggestions. Encourage them to apply themselves most fully in their visions and ideas. See if you can help them with your own style and expertise.

Let me know how it goes – I'll publish the most interesting responses.