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## Closing the Door We Came in Through

By: Ken Hanley (26 Mar 1999)

Do you remember watching A Charlie Brown Christmas when you were a kid (or even last year with your kids)? Doesn't everybody? Do you remember Charlie Brown asking Lucy for advice at her five cent psychiatry booth, 'cause he just didn't feel right about Christmas?

After reeling off a long list of his possible fears, phobias and psychiatric conditions, Lucy asks: "Do you think you might have pantophobia, Charlie Brown?"

"Pantophobia? What's pantophobia?" he says.

"The fear of everything."

"THAT'S IT!" he yells, and turns over the booth with Lucy in it.

We all have those "THAT'S IT!" moments once in a while - I had one the other day.

I was talking with a senior project manager at a large company in Calgary, talking about good project ideas that never came to fruition, good projects that never got a chance to be good projects, and potentially profitable projects that failed miserably during implementation.

We agreed that there was a problem with companies that not only wouldn't force people to make use of new systems as they came on-line, they weren't even very good at strongly encouraging people to use new systems.

So just how would we describe this kind of project-killing behaviour?

Thank God for the masters of analogy, and he's one of them: "The problem," he said, "is that when a project opens a new door in front of organizations, they never seem to close the old door behind them."

THAT'S IT!

The kiss of death is planted on the lips of too many IT projects the minute it becomes clear that the (supposedly) sponsoring organization has no intention of providing any real incentive to change to the new processes suggested by a new system, and worse, that there's no downside to staying with the old way of doing things. Organizations in fact poison their own project environments when they make it easier to stay with the old way of doing things, than they do to accept and adapt to the new.

You can easily see how this happens when you consider that we do the same things as individuals. Ever tried to give up coffee? Ever tried to keep up a new exercise routine even when your muscles were stiff? Ever tried to build a more solid golf swing and stick with it, despite the all too-frequent 3-iron flyers to the left? It's just too easy to fall back on old habits.

Telling people that they've got to change, that they've got to adopt new systems, involves the acceptance by the organization of a tough message, a tough message that has to be widely communicated and understood: the old way of doing things is no longer an option.

How would it go over in your organization if the CEO announced: "The old finance system gets unplugged permanently at the end of March. I want you all to understand that we expect you to dig in to the testing of, and training on, the new system, 'cause I want to make it perfectly clear to everyone that there's no going back."

Have you considered that it just might take this kind of message to ensure that new projects and new systems in your organization get the kind of attention they need to be successful?

When we open that new door, we need to confirm that the old doors are closed loudly and firmly, so that everyone knows that they're closed for good.

This isn't to say that good IT project managers damn the torpedoes no matter what happens. There is a place for well-reasoned bailout points in every project (more on that next time), but we do need to ask ourselves an important question: Assuming that our next project delivers a good business solution, does our organization have the intestinal fortitude to insist that everyone make use of it?

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