It's the End, Not the Means
By: Ken Hanley (21 Apr 2000)

Here I go again. I find myself thinking that what effective IT is all about is simply effective project management.

I think that if we could just make a concerted effort to write down and agree on what the end of a project looked like before it got started; if we could just insist on having the tough discussions that would force project stakeholders to an agreement on the things that were fundamentally driving the project; if we could just push to make sure that every project had an objective and widely understood set of performance criteria - just that stuff, and we'd know that (almost) all the projects we ever undertook would be a success.

And for those projects that didn't stand a chance of being a success? Well, we'd be brave enough to make that call at the very beginning, and we'd be brave enough to shoot them dead before they burned up a single hour of valuable time, or a single hard-earned dollar.

Am I right? Is it all just a matter of effective project management?

Of course I'm right: Tom Peters said so: "All work is project work," he said in Fast Company in May of last year. Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus, and yes, Virginia, if it's Tom Peters and it's Fast Company, its got to be right, doesn't it?

But wait a minute: are we project management devotees guilty of the same crimes that we tend to accuse the hard core techies of?

The crime is this: believing in a single solution to every problem. Is it true that if our only tool is a hammer, that every problem in the world looks like a nail?

So maybe, just maybe, it's not just project management, maybe it's more than that. (I'm thinking about the Grinch here, discovering that for the Whos down in Whoville, "Christmas came just the same.") Maybe it's what the effective application of project management implies instead. And if we're right, it implies results.

And that's where we're falling into the same damn trap that every other silver bullet in the IT world has fallen into. No, it wasn't just about client/server or objects or networks - it was supposed to be all about better results for the business. No, it isn't just about internet technology - it's supposed to be about better results for the business by using internet technology. And here it comes - it isn't just about project management, and too many of us, myself included, are forgetting that. It isn't the means that matter; it's the end.

I see us forgetting more every day. My desk is buried with brochures hawking "revolutionary project management training," and "world class project management tools and techniques" and "a cutting edge project management conference".

And we're missing the point again: why don't the brochures say "Better results for the Business" in big letters, and "Through effective IT project management" in small letters? Like we've done so often in IT, we're forgetting that senior executives live and die by the words in the big letters, and couldn't care less about what the small letters say.

Not that I necessarily think we should be taking lessons from the big-gun advertisers, but I do think we should pay close attention to the way they sell cars - they don't simply sell a car, they sell the life experiences that will result from having and driving the car they're selling.

I fear that we're on track to the same marketing ineffectiveness they used to accuse one of the big computer manufacturers of: it was said that if this company was responsible for marketing sushi, they'd be promoting it as "cold dead fish."

If we can't get past pushing the means of project management, if we don't quickly get to focusing on the ends, on the life experiences, on the better results, we'll fail again.

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