

LOWER YOUR PERISCOPE TO INSURE PROJECT SUCCESS

A movie called **Down Periscope** was released in 1995 starring Kelsey Grammer as the Captain and Lauren Holly as the Dive Officer. The story deals with an unconventional executive officer who is awarded a captain's commission on an even more unconventional submarine (affectionately called the USS Rustoleum) with a crew hand picked by his antagonist to ensure failure. I recommend watching the movie first. The basic plot is how the Captain (and crew) succeeds against all odds using methods that are directly applicable to computer systems project management. The methods can be summed up with the three key words:

- Ceremony
- Integrity
- Trust

Ceremony

Ceremony is a way of attaching significance and expressing appreciation by following an acceptable ritual. Some projects already have a pariah when they start, others grow them like a wart during their life cycle. A pariah can be any number of things such as an unrealistic project schedule, less than optimum working conditions, or a person who is not a team player. In **Down Periscope** one pariah is the executive officer whom we begin to dislike almost as much as the two star antagonist. After the executive officer has managed to alienate the entire crew the Captain ceremoniously eliminates him. If your project pariah is a person I would not recommend having him walk the plank as a solution as was done in the movie.

Some examples from my career come to mind. Once during a start-up, my development team members were forced to walk down a flight of stairs to a computer room to make system changes. After some checking I discovered that some wires capable of being connected to the computer downstairs were hidden in the ceiling above my team's work area, but red tape prevented anyone from making a connection. So, after normal working hours another team member and I went into the ceiling and performed a red tape removal ceremony. The following morning the team performed an appreciation ceremony by simply saying "thank you". However, the story does not end here, because everyone on the team worked a little harder after that.

Another example was a floundering project I inherited just about the time that the users were ready to discontinue the project because nothing acceptable had been delivered. After analyzing the situation I realized that there were no ongoing milestones, only one large deliverable. There was only one point in the project where the developers and the users could feel good about what they had accomplished and that was project completion. I decided an off site developer/user schedule resurrection meeting to revise the schedule was needed. The meeting was held at my house for two reasons: to show commitment and urgency, and because scheduling my house did not require management approval.

Chart pads were set up, pizza was ordered, soft drinks dispensed, and libations were placed in the refrigerator. By three in the afternoon the refrigerator was opened because we had a new schedule that contained numerous intermediate attainable milestones.

One 1990's paradigm is: "it is always a people problem". This type of problem is always the most difficult for me, probably because I fail, at times, to remember that different people view the same event differently. I fall into the trap of forgetting this instead of taking advantage of it. An example would be placing some one on special assignment in lieu of plank-walking. If handled properly the placed party could view his reassignment favorably, and others could view it as an obstacle removed with no stigma attached.

Integrity

Integrity is a word that is difficult to define. However, if you are not viewed as possessing this trait your power base is that of a dictator. Integrity should be considered a superset of honesty. I like to use one of my life experiences for the definition. Returning home after having made some purchases at a building supply store, I reviewed the register receipt and discovered that I was not charged for an item that cost about eight dollars, so I went back to the store to pay for it. To reward me for my honesty, the store manager gave me a certificate for ten percent off my next purchase. I easily could have abused the privilege, but I never used the certificate. That is my definition of integrity. When Dive Officer's (Lauren Holly) uniform was replaced with one three sizes too small, the Captain demonstrated this trait when he canceled leave for the entire crew instead of using a crewman who volunteered to take the entire blame as a scapegoat. A team without integrity possesses no loyalty.

Integrity is a topic that mostly is referred to when it is missing. When I think about my career experiences the first thought that comes to my mind are all the examples of the lack of integrity, upon deeper thought I remember all those wonderful people who have demonstrated integrity. However, I have difficulty remembering what I'll call an act of integrity, and the reason probably is because those acts were never associated with a ceremony, something to commemorate and appreciate the event, to mark its significance. We tend to commemorate only the lack of integrity, just follow the tabloid news and work place gossip. We need to alter this by employing more appreciation ceremonies.

Trust

Trust is dependent on integrity. The power base for trust is referent, meaning that it is granted to you by others; it must be earned. The Captain earned the trust of his crew during the first dive when he solved an equipment problem and then proceeded to successfully take the boat below crush depth. Actually two trust relationships were formed: captain and crew, crew and ship.

During a start-up I had a simple rule, anyone making a change would be there the following morning to support it. The purpose was not to generate trust between my team and me, but to promote trust between my team and its user community. The high point of this trust relationship was when a team member was asked to be substitute temporary production manager.

Summary

Trust and integrity were below ceremony on my list, because ceremony is the tool necessary to propagate trust and integrity. These three form the success triangle.