A Date with Dave

By: Ken Hanley (14 Dec 2001)

So it wasn't really a date actually, but rather one of our semi-regular get togethers over lunch. But "Lunch with" doesn't work unless his name is Larry. Or Leonard. Which it isn't.

These auspicious exchanges of wisdom (mostly one way, him to me I must confess) usually start with a phone call from said Dave: "Hanley, you old Chinese menu item you - time for us to get together and share a bean."

A bit of background is in order here: Dave believes that truly inspired and effective insults are multi-part efforts, and the result of careful mechanics as much as inspired belittlement. Hence the best insults, much like the best meals in a Chinese restaurant, involve picking one item from each of three columns.

He could have (and has) said: "Hanley, you bum-dragging (selection from column #1) , poorly-dressed, (selection from column #2) troglodyte (selection from column #3), but familiarity between us has reduced it simply to "You Chinese menu item you."

Lunch was the order of the day, and the Bear and Kilt it was. Dave doesn't much go in for the kind of places where white-jacketed waiters serve dry martinis. The B and K is ideal - a little bit ratty, 20 years of cigarette smoke embedded in the walls, good fish and chips and (for me at least) an easily accessible assortment of cold beer.

Dave and I talk project management when we get together; he being an engineer and me being an IT guy, we have a common interest in the subject, but often look at the same issues from opposite sides of an abyss.

As much as Dave likes to make fun of us "pointy-headed" IT types, he also lets loose on his own engineering compatriots: "Know how you can tell you're dealing with a really outgoing engineer? He looks down at your shoes when he's talking to you…"

Dave is one of the world's naturally gifted PMs, and teases levels of performance out of teams and projects that the rest of us can only dream about.

Considerable skills aside, there's no pretence here - his team's effort to radically reduce drilling costs for deep natural gas had a simple title and success metric: Cheap and Deep - and it was both.

As we sit down, Dave tells me he's starting up his own oil company "Dave's Oil and Gas," he said. "Our motto? What a difference a Dave makes." I'd have to agree. "Actually," he said, "we're out to have a lot of fun and make a pile of money." Don't you wish everyone was as straightforward about what they want out of a project?

With Dave, I've learned that we'd all do well to gather 'round when he's on a roll. And he was on a roll last week at lunch.

"Hanley, this stakeholder management stuff you talk about is all well and good, but I think maybe you're missing something."

I lean closer: "You're right when you say that we've got to have better ways of communicating, managing and driving senior management accountability for major projects. And I know we all whine about the amount of support we do or don't get from those management weenie types."

I'm with him thus far, but then he reminds me that while we're turning ourselves inside out trying to figure out how they (management or project sponsors) can support us, we're forgetting one cardinal rule about managing projects well.

I wait for the wisdom to pour out. If this weren't Calgary with its restrictive anti-smoking laws, I swear Dave'd have lit one up before he got started: "It's all about defending your sponsor's credibility, when you think about it."

OK, so he's got my attention. I've been thinking a lot lately about what my teams need from their sponsor; I can't say that I've given a lot of thought to what they need from a PM and a project team.

"Sure we need support from them," Dave said, "but they something from us too - they need the information on a project that that makes them credible with the people they report to."

So one of the key questions to ask on any IT project is simply this: what do your sponsors need to see for the project to be successful in their eyes? Do you know? Have you asked?

"And it's not just one level up either," Dave said. "Look at your sponsor's boss - same question - what can you do to help them out?"

It occurs to me that this simple question is one that we most often overlook - what do they need from us?

Lunch with Dave - always a pleasure, always a perspective on project performance that I seem to be neglecting.

I'd invite you all along next time Dave and I have lunch, but you might not like the surroundings.

Luxurious it ain't; educational it is.

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