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## **A Question That, Sadly, We Still Ask**

By: Ken Hanley (25 Jul 2003)

If you're feeling chipper, I suggest you stop reading now, and that you give your head a shake - these are dark days in our business, my friend.

In line with my mood, the weather around here, and the state of the economy, what follows is a bitter blast that you might only hear from me late in the evening, when we've loosened the ties, when the last of the cigars are gone, when we've missed last call, and when the first meeting tomorrow morning is scheduled for 7 a.m.

The issue is dumb questions. Yes, dumb questions are asked in our business. And the real crime is that consultants, the good, the bad and the indifferent, get paid lots of money to provide self-evident answers to questions that are clearly, well, dumb.

Example: What performance metrics should we use to determine whether or not we're being successful on this project?

A serious and important question in and of itself, because it is critical that each IT project we take on have a few (not more than three or four, by the way) objective, well-communicated metrics that indicate how successful a project is being as it progresses, and ultimately how successful it is when it is finished. Performance metrics are so important that a project should never even launch until they are formally agreed to - why would you start without a clear idea of what success looks like?

You may be brave enough to fire up a major IT project trusting that in some way, shape or form, you'll be successful in the end, but I'm not.

So maybe it's not that the question itself is so dumb as much as it is that the answer should be staring us right in the face. I've seen teams of people engage in major activity determining what these project performance metrics should be.

And here's where it gets dumb: shouldn't the performance metrics for a project be directly related to why the project was selected in the first place? We IT types get criticized for not being more "plugged in" to what drives the businesses we support, and sometimes for good reasons.

But if a project was selected/approved in our organization because management believes it will lead to a direct reduction in operating costs, shouldn't the project performance metrics, surprise, surprise, be some measure of operating cost reduction?

If the project was selected to improve the satisfaction of our customer base, doesn't it logically follow that a key performance metric would be a measurable improvement in customer satisfaction?

There are rules about writing this stuff down. I recognize that other people have feelings, and that it's not a good idea to hurt them if you can avoid it.

And I do avoid hurting feelings when I can: I get calls from people I know, people I've worked with on projects, on a regular basis. After the pleasantries, they almost invariably ask: "Were you thinking about me/us/our organization when you wrote that last column?"

If, on the other hand, the column was critical and the person/people/organization I was writing about was being indicted as miserable pinheads, miscreants or ignoramuses, the answer is always, "No, of course I wasn't thinking about you or your organization...I was thinking about someone else when I wrote that one."

Even if I am talking to the pinhead/miscreant/ignoramus in question.

So for the purposes of this column, no matter who you are, I'd like to go on record as saying I'm not thinking about you, or the organization you're working for. Even if you do ask this dumb question, trust me, I 'm thinking about someone else.

And really, to clarify, I guess it's not that the question itself is so dumb, it's that the answer to this one should be staring us right in the face, and we miss it entirely.

Now that's dumb.

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