

How Words Limit Our Thinking

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A few years ago, my older son said, "Dad, it isn't enough to think outside the box. We must learn to live outside the box."

Our preconceived notions about the meanings of words can limit our ability to understand changes taking place every day. "Organization" for example, is defined in *asapm* and IPMA documentation as "permanent organization." Whom among you will wager that the Detroit Automobile Industry will survive another twenty years? Ten? Five? At the end of 1998, Compaq was the largest and most profitable PC maker in the world. In March of 2003 (51 months later) Compaq became a wholly owned division of HP. My resume is filled with corporations that I've survived, and I'm beginning to suspect that even I am not permanent. There are no permanent organizations.

Productivity is another word in transition. In the era of mass production, productivity is measured in units of satisfactory output. In an era when many/most customers demand customized outputs, what exactly is the point of measuring anything other than satisfied customers? Once Burger King started making noise about "have it your way," only the suicidal would choose not to follow. Yes, the Detroit Automobile Industry *is* suicidal.

Which brings into question the definitions of a whole host of words, i.e., quality, excellence, practices, project management ...

Quality, we are taught, is defined by the customer. Yet we would not take McDonalds seriously if it tried to satisfy our desires for a fancy meal in a French restaurant. McDonalds offers us a bundle of values; low cost, speed, predictability, convenience. On those occasions when these are valuable to us, we drive through for a Big Mac. Still, the quality we are buying is defined by the seller. We are only accepting the definition for the moment and we certainly reserve the right to look for a different definition for our next meal.

Excellence, like quality, is in the eye of the beholder. There simply is no objective definition of the word that stands the test of time. The fastest computer in the world in 1977, which cost \$17 million and weighed eleven tons, had nearly two-thirds the computing power of my current cell phone, only thirty years later. Already a newer, smaller, faster, and more functional model has replaced the phone I bought less than a year ago.

Practices presume a permanent organization that learns, tests, and adopts ways of doing things. These quickly become institutionalized and just as quickly become vulnerabilities as competitors develop the next generation of practices/vulnerabilities. The phrase, "That's not how we do things here" must be heard often in the halls of these Automobile Industry headquarters.

Because we have identified a set of skills and labeled them **project management**, we think a project manager is necessary. A reasonable alternative to empowered managers is empowered teams. In this environment, collaboration is not simply an option, it is a survival technique. If teammates hold the power to reward or to punish our behavior, we will collaborate, contribute, and cooperate. If team members are trained in the skill set we call project management, can a team manage a project? Can a team manage a project more effectively, efficiently, and quickly than an individual project manager? Might a team centered approach have avoided the following example?

On the morning of January 28, 1986, manager Jerald Mason said to a subordinate,

"Take off your engineering hat and put on your management hat."

His comment contributed to the loss of seven human lives and cost the United States a valuable spacecraft. His error is easy enough to recognize in retrospect. How might it have been avoided? Certainly there were abundant reasons to believe that the concerns of engineers were little more than ultraconservatism. After all, O-ring abrasion had been detected on several earlier flights of the space shuttle and none of those launches had serious problems. President Reagan was eager to interrupt his State of the Union message to Congress to exchange greetings with Christa McAuliffe aboard the Challenger. The potential impact on future NASA budgets would be immense. The opportunity was too good to let pass.

Each of us hopes for a long and comfortable future. At best, our future is likely to be more interesting than comfortable. What humans know about our universe is doubling every year. Each of us is likely to be falling behind that learning curve except, perhaps, in a very narrow window of expertise that is our specialty. No single person knows or understands enough to produce genuine innovation. Instead, we are called on to work collaboratively with other specialists whose expertise complements our own. Decisions are better made by cross-functional teams than by individual managers. A project manager who dares to produce a project plan without massive doses of input from others is clearly in search of failure. Now a different word must take a much more important place in our vocabulary. *Collaboration* is the penultimate skill each of us must develop.

Collaboration is no easy task. Our parents raised us to be independent. Now we are faced with a world that demands we become interdependent. Collaboration is not easy for project managers. We are accustomed to both responsibility and accountability. In a collaborative effort, we must not only listen to what others have to say, we must accept what we do not fully understand.

Teams do manage projects every day. Because of the legacy of Frederick Winslow Taylor, most of these teams are stuck reporting to an individual manager who occupies a box in a Taylor hierarchy. The manager ratifies, because he or she doesn't know enough not to, decisions that are made by the team. I'm not at all sure that the ratification process adds value and I suspect it always takes extra time. Gee, does time matter?

When I raised this possibility in Moscow a few years ago, a CEO asked, "How will I know who to punish?" The point of allowing teams to manage themselves is to avoid the need to punish anybody. If we plan for failure, too often, that is what we get. Quite a lot of research suggests that, much more often than not, teams make better decisions than the average team member. Occasionally, teams make better decisions than the best of the team members. Only rarely do teams make poorer decisions than the average team member.

As my older son said, "Dad, it isn't enough to think outside the box. We must learn to live outside the (Taylor hierarchy) box."

About the Author

Ed Fern is a long-time contributor to the practice of Project Management, and his article, "*Six Steps to the Future: How Mass Customizing is Changing the World*" published on the *asapm* website five years ago, continues to be one of the top-rated links on our site. Ed's websites include time-to-profit.com, his company's main site, and pm-prepare.com, a service that helps you assure yourself that are ready for a popular exam-based PM certification.