

Fulfillment in the Workplace

BY MIKE SUTTON

Working in the IS industry is often similar to putting up the steel frame work of a skyscraper. For both IS professionals and the people who erect these steel structures there's not a lot of opportunity to step back and admire their work. Now, that may be insignificant to many, but for some of us the lack of closure can be unsettling.

IS projects often seem to drag on forever and take on a life of their own in the process. Application deadlines are extended for various reasons, making the end-date seem like a mirage in the desert. In addition, today's IS staff is volatile in the sense that people are often moved from project to project to fight fires or because an executive "wants the project finished." The result can be frustrating when an employee seems to be within a gnat's eyelash of completing an important piece of work only to be shuffled off to take part in another project.

Another issue facing employees today is the dreaded "project-takeover." This sounds a little like a bloodless coup, but in fact can be extremely frustrating. One of the people WSC, Inc. works with, Ray Futran, sums it up this way: "Taking over someone else's work in the latter stages of a project can be tough. If you pick up a piece of work at 'P' there's often no documentation or notes on how the person who worked on it before you got from 'A' to 'O'.

Adding to the project-takeover woes is something that plagues the IS industry in general: The Folklore Factor. Even if the process is documented, traditional information almost never gets recorded. What does this mean? Simply that what was done has been noted, but not why, which can often be more important. More about this topic next month.

OK, so I've talked about some of the issues that can contribute to a lack of closure in the workplace. Now, what are its symptoms and how can we try to avoid it? Let's look at this from two perspectives, the employees' and management's.

THE EMPLOYEES' PERSPECTIVE

People who are experiencing this type of frustration react in a variety of ways. Some display anger and/or irritability in the workplace, on the road, at home or all three. It's also not uncommon for employees to be unsettled by a change in their work assignment, exhibit animosity as a result, and not know why they are doing it. If this is the case, a person may become difficult to work with, seemingly overnight.

It's almost impossible to fix a problem before you recognize its root cause. But, if you are an individual experiencing this type of situation, here's one small suggestion that may help. We usually create more barriers for ourselves than anyone else does. However, we have the ability to remove these barriers if we can recognize their presence. If you anticipate and enjoy project completion, but you don't ever seem to reach the endpoint, move the horizon. By this I mean that we can all change the goal we are working toward. It doesn't have to be the final completion of a project. Let me give you an example.

When I joined the U. S. Army in August 1963, I was faced with 12 weeks of basic training at Fort Knox, Ky. At that age, three months seemed like an eternity. The only alternative I had was to suck it up and "be a man."

I remember making a conscious decision to not worry about getting to the end of basic, but instead just getting through the day. So, every morning when our drill instructor tossed an empty garbage can down the spit-shined aisle of our WW-II barracks, I'd say to myself: "I don't care if they kill me tomorrow, but I'm going to get through today!"

Granted, that's an extreme example, but the point is, move the goal closer to yourself. Set some professional or personal mile-marker within whatever time frame makes you comfortable.


MANAGEMENT'S PERSPECTIVE

A more insidious issue may be lack of

job satisfaction and a resulting drop in performance. This phenomena is generally easier for fellow employees to live with, and everyone to recognize, but may be a lot harder to fix.

The better a manager knows his employees, the more likely he will be able to avoid these kinds of pitfalls. However, from a management standpoint, in today's workplace there's often little choice of which projects people work on.

Certainly where possible, most people in leadership positions try to match employees with a preferred work environment. The reason is simple: Happy people perform better. If an employee is disgruntled, for whatever reason, the employer isn't getting what its paying for. But, in today's world of "do more with less," knowing that someone prefers one type of assignment over another may be about as useful to a leader as a lantern is in the hands of a blind man.

Management's coaching and counseling job is getting considerably tougher in that respect. Making employees feel comfortable is not a trivial task. In my experience, the best elixir is constant communications. Telling employees how they are doing, where their project(s) stand, and celebrating milestones (even the little ones) are all things that can make people feel better about any situation and particularly those they may not be totally comfortable with. 

NaSPA member Mike Sutton's Vietnam novel, *No Survivors* (ISBN 0-8338-0226-7) is available from Marshall Jones Co. at (800) 258-1505. Mike is donating 33 percent of the royalties from his book to the Center for Homeless Veterans.

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