

TEST & QA REPORT

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A Failure to Communicate

By Edward J. Correia

Last week's story about Torsten Zelger and his post-lunch debugging debacle seemed to many of you an obvious failure to communicate, a disastrous circumstance for any team, no matter how cool your hand.

Thanks for your letters. Here are a few excerpts:

What we have here is a problem of communication—and with project management, a failure to adhere to the division of responsibility and authority, poor communications, inadequate procedures—all leading to not just stealth deployment, but to potential chaos.

Joseph De Natale
Wellesley, MA

...

I would have thought this to be obvious. I have been testing products for a long time (over 20 years), and even at the beginning of my career, I always wanted to know what changes were going on with the test system. I think the key is communication and without that, you (as a test engineer) will not know if you are

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testing the correct configuration or software version.

Gretchen Henrich
Dayton, OH

...

To me, this is what the "agilists" really never address. They put lots of premium on people not processes, and they like the world in which specs and regulations do not interfere with the development process.

The problem is that if you don't follow specs and regs... chaos ultimately ensues. We all know the populist views of agilists. It would be good if one day they would discuss the role of rules, regs, requirements and discipline.

Andrew Binstock
San Carlos, CA

I described Zelger's scenario to **Linda Burrs**, principal consultant at Step Up To Success, which offers training for corporate teams on communication and other areas of professional development. She said that such breakdowns in communications are typical, especially among information technology groups. "I've found that most IT people tend to be introverted," which, she said, often results in fewer conversations. "Introverts want to conserve energy—the less words, the better."

Collaborative Communication

Burrs said that the problem could have been fixed a long time ago if each team had a representative whose job was to collaborate—to communicate their own team's needs and discover the needs of others. Before teams begin working together, **Burrs** recommended, they should

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first establish such communication channels. "This ensures that everyone understands what the relationships are and what is important to each team," even if it isn't important to their own.

Burrs added, "Even though we may all be speaking English, we're not always speaking the same language." Differences in experience, culture and job description all shape how "we think the world ought to be," she said, and team members often ignore the other person's perspective. "This is what causes teams to fail."

Successful collaboration involves feedback—giving the other groups information about your group that they wouldn't otherwise know. "Stop and think about what you need the other group to know about your needs, and what you need to know about theirs, so that the entire organization can succeed and be effective."

The way to be effective, she said, is for everyone involved to know what the organization is trying to achieve, to set expectations of the teams in advance, and to provide useful feedback along the way.

"You are a bunch of idiots and you're screwing stuff up" is not useful feedback. "Feedback is the difference between the ordered position and the actual position," she said, and it can be useful only when it provides sufficient information for the recipient to modify behavior in a way that helps the organization.

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