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## Leveraging Discontent

By Daniel Read

In response to a previous article entitled “Your Own Software Development Company,” I received this letter, from a reader who (because of the letter’s subject matter) will remain anonymous:

I think the advice was great. Especially the first paragraph about being honest. However, I personally think many businesses forget one incredibly important aspect to focus on besides their customers: I am talking about a business’s employees. As a developer, I personally am searching for a company wanting to invest in not only building happy, healthy relationships with their customers but with their employees as well. Just think of the company who invests in building such a culture in their company. No matter how successful the company is, just think how much more successful they would be if all their employees looked forward to coming to work every day and really felt the company respected and appreciated them!!! And I am not talking about just through salary. While that’s important, if you focus on the building your employees up, productivity can only explode.

The author of this letter (for the sake of convenience, let’s call him Paul) is clearly unhappy in his current position. I 100% agree with Paul that if the leadership of a company would focus more on employees and the conditions in which they are asked to work, then several measures of success (not just productivity), would, to use Paul’s phrase, explode.

However, more than enough has been written on how companies, managers, and team leaders can improve conditions for and relationships with their employees, and how these improvements can reap huge benefits for the company, team, project, and product. (For those interested in that topic, I list some excellent books at the end of this column.) However, much, if not all, of this literature is focused on advice for those people who are the appointed or *de facto* leader of a team. Not enough has been written about how to be an effective team *member*. My intention in this installment is to turn Paul’s question on its head: as a member of a team, how can I make a difference in improving the conditions in which I work, and in the way I am treated by the managers above me.

Too often, members of a team do not understand the power a non-appointed leader can have in influencing the direction of a team, or in initiating change. This subject of improving a team from within is especially relevant in what are (at the time of this writing) slower economic times. The jobs are no longer falling off trees. When I left my last position, it took me exactly 24 hours to find a new position. I doubt that would be the case today. So if I am unhappy where I am, do I just suffer through it, or do I try to make some kind of a difference there? Or is it so hopeless that I should look for another job and risk taking a lower salary, or even ending up in a worse situation? Even if I could easily find

another job somewhere, is there any value in sticking it out and trying to make a difference?

Before getting into some specific actions and strategies for initiating change in your team and organization, I'd like to examine the question of attitude. Very often (though certainly not always), when a person is unhappy or discontented in his or her current circumstances, it has less to do with the actual circumstances and more to do with the person's *perception* of those circumstances. A person's attitude and outlook has a *huge* effect how that person views the world around him. One of my favorite aphorisms is, "What's coming at you is coming from you." Stop and think about that for a second. This is a powerful statement, and one that I have found to be true over and over again in my own life.

In the classic book (originally published in 1956) *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society*, author Kenneth Boulding has another way of saying the same thing:

The man who goes into the world believing that everyone is his enemy will very soon find his suspicions confirmed. The man who acts as if everyone were his friend likewise is likely to be confirmed in his optimism....Both suspicion and trust are, up to a point, self-justifying. (1)

My point here is certainly not to say that *everyone* who is having a bad time is deluded somehow and bringing trouble onto themselves. With many people, though, that is precisely the case. Even in those cases where there is not a cause-and-effect relationship between negativity and bad circumstances, negativity blinds the person from seeing a way out of the situation other than escape.

It is important to take a step back and ask some questions: How much of the negativity I perceive as coming my way is really there, and how much of it is created by me? How often do I immediately jump to the negative or pessimistic view of a situation? How often do I immediately assume that the people around me are acting with a nefarious hidden agenda? How much of this perceived negativity would be there no matter what company I worked for? Looking back at my career, have I *ever* had a job where I was truly happy, and felt respected and well treated by the people around me? If not, is that just an example of a long string of bad luck, or could I be the problem? Is this place really any better or worse than any other place I might end up? Am I just projecting hard times outside of work into my job? Is what's coming at me coming from me?

I am a big believer in the philosophy that a positive mental attitude is an essential component of success in life. People who are positive can see opportunity and possibility where negative people only see failure and obstruction. The same opportunities are there for everyone to see, but only those who see them can take advantage of them, and only those who take advantage of them can reap their benefits. I don't have the source to cite, but Einstein once said "In the middle of difficulties lies opportunity." Similarly, Napoleon Hill and W. Clement Stone wrote, "Every adversity has the seed of an equivalent or greater benefit." (2)

It is important to realize that if you are discontented in your job, and you keep it to yourself, then it's pretty difficult for anyone to realize it, and highly unlikely that anything will change to make the situation better. Even if you are vocal about your discontent, endless complaining without action is a mild form of insanity.

So who should you talk to, and more importantly, *how* should you talk about your discontent? While I will not go so far as to say that you should not talk frankly with your fellow team members about your difficulties, I will say that you should be careful in this area if you wish to have some kind of a positive impact. While there is probably some value in a little cathartic complaining amongst the troops, too much of this kind of negativity only breeds more negativity, and will probably a) make people feel worse, and b) make people who were previously feeling okay start to wonder if they should be feeling badly along with you.

Let's look at three specific strategies for trying to initiate change and make a difference in your team. These are not in any particular order of priority. On your team, in your unique circumstances, and depending on your personality, one of these might stand out as an ideal approach, or some combination might be best. Or maybe one of these strategies will spark a totally different idea that I never thought of.

The first strategy is the most direct one: try talking to whoever is in charge about your frustrations. If you decide to talk to your manager directly, it is important to do so in a frank, but non-blaming and non-confrontational manner. Take your manager out to lunch, or pull her aside for a short meeting in a private conference room or office. Discuss your frustrations. Explain how you feel. Be careful not to show any disrespect. Communicate what it is about management behavior, or the environment, or company policy that is making things difficult. Again, be careful not to use blaming or confrontational language.

This direct approach may sound frightening to people who dread confrontations and go out of their way to avoid them. However, don't view this meeting with your manager as a confrontation. It will most likely only be confrontational if you make it that way with your body language and choice of words. It is important to remember that the world has very few truly bad or mean people. Most people, even your managers, are people just like you, with fears and insecurities, hopes and dreams, frustrations and disillusionment. Managers are in an especially tough spot because they get pressure from both above and below.

Often, for your managers, pressures from above carry more weight than the ones from below, because the people above have the power to take the manager's job. Often, managers focus more on the pressures from above, and neglect what's going on in their own teams, because they have such a high degree of confidence in the people on their teams. Other times, a manager might feel that a team of highly paid professionals should not need to be "coddled," especially when that team is largely made up of contractors, so they take a very hands-off approach. Some managers are just gruff, and will never be "touchy-feely." Some managers, especially technical ones, were thrust into their situation

without a single hour of training on how to be a good manager. None of these things, however, necessarily make them bad people, or total jerks.

If your manager is managing ineffectually, or doing something that is making life on the team difficult, chances are she does not even realize it, and simply bringing it to her attention in a constructive way will make her focus her energy on correcting the problem. Try to see things from your manager's point of view, and approach her with that in mind. Go into the conversation under the assumption that your manager cares what you think, and will listen closely to what you have to say. If your attitude and approach invites a positive reaction, you will likely get one. What's coming at you is coming from you.

The second strategy involves looking around your team to identify who the "implicit" leader is (or are). On almost any team of more than a few people, there is an appointed leader (that's your manager), but there are also members of the team who are highly influential, who have the ear of the appointed leader, who lead by example, and who most of the other team members look to for queues on how to act. Try to identify these people. Sometimes they are developers just like you, or sometimes they are playing the role of "team lead" or "technical lead" (which can be an awkward spot, with one foot in the team, and one foot in management).

When you have identified him or her, take a look at two things: first, is this implicit leader part of the problem? Is he having a bad time lately, in or out of work? Has her attitude suffered, and is this negative attitude spreading to the rest of the team? Second, if this implicit leader is not directly part of the problem, in what way could he be part of the solution? In either case, take this person out to lunch and try to get him to help in the situation. Explain your view of what is wrong, and what it is that has you frustrated. Ask the person for his guidance. Talk about the poor morale on the team, and discuss strategies for improving it. Talk about the managers, and what policies or management styles are causing problems. Ask for this person's insight into why a certain manager is acting the way he is. Try to get the whole story. If you think that this implicit leader's attitude and actions are part of the problem, address that—again, in a non-blaming and non-confrontational way.

If all goes well, this implicit leader can take the lead from there, getting together with the manager, adjusting his or her own attitude, calling a meeting with the team, instituting some process change, etc.

One more thing: when you take that look around to identify the implicit leader, be prepared to realize that the implicit leader is you.

The third strategy is perhaps the most radical: call the team together in secret, under the radar screen of management. The point of this meeting is not to have a complaint session, but to try to discuss ways that you can all work together to improve the situation. A team unified has tremendous power to initiate change. If you have especially negative and vocal people on the team, try to pull these people aside before having this meeting, and tell them that you recognize their influence on the team, and need their help especially. If

you can't get them to actively help, try to at least get them to promise to stay quiet. If you need help with all this, or don't feel comfortable being this forward, try to enlist the help of the implicit leader(s) to call and lead this meeting.

This unified strategy is probably only effective when the majority of the team is in the same state of discontent that you are, and when morale overall is low. You should be pretty sure of this fact before you proceed calling a meeting, and you should be sure you are not just projecting your own discontent onto the rest of the team. It is also very important that your unified actions as a team do not come across to management as mutiny. Making demands and ultimatums is probably not an effective strategy. Rather, this team-based approach is really just a larger scale version of the first two strategies we discussed: trying to find a way to approach management in a productive, positive way to initiate positive change.

These sorts of direct actions are good ways to jumpstart change, but it is important to remember the effect of little everyday interactions and attitudes. Negativity in a team is poison. Negativity in the team's attitude breeds more negativity. If people are constantly complaining, or seeing only the potential downside of any given situation, then identification of the real problems becomes that much more difficult, and worse, these negative prophecies become self-fulfilling. If ideas in meetings are consistently shot down, then the flow of ideas, critical in any team environment, will stop. Take some initiative, and try to cultivate a positive attitude. If you hear someone being negative, try to turn the tide on that by being doubly positive yourself and/or pulling that person aside later and trying to show them the destructive nature of their language and attitude.

With all of that said, I recognize that sometimes you do just end up working for one of those truly nasty people, or for one of those truly disturbed or emotionally scarred people. You might try all these strategies and meet brick walls at every turn. You might be reading all this and saying, "You don't know *my* manager." Sometimes the situation is so bad that you really should just find a way out. I have been in that situation myself. I leave it to you to figure out when that is. Different people have different thresholds. My message, though, is this: do not make escape your default action, and don't give up too soon. Make sure you take a good look around, and a good look in the mirror, before deciding whether you should leave, or if there is some way to leverage your discontent to make a better situation for you and everyone else on your team.

I will end this installment with a quote from Gerald Weinberg's excellent book, *Becoming a Technical Leader*:

The best-designed working groups are those in which leadership comes from everybody, not merely the appointed leaders. Therefore you need not wait—you should not wait—for an appointment. (3)

## References

- (1) Kenneth E. Boulding, *The Image: Knowledge in Life and Society*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1987), p 125
- (2) Napoleon Hill and W. Clement Stone, *Success through a Positive Mental Attitude*, (New York, NY, Pocket Books, 1977 (originally published 1960)), p 6
- (3) Gerald Weinberg, *Becoming a Technical Leader: An Organic Problem-Solving Approach*, (New York, NY, Dorset House, 1986), p 51

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