

Alone

As winter slogs on, we almost get used to feeling alone.

Here, where the winter is somewhat mild, the mornings are still frosty, but the most recent afternoons have started their hollow promises of a spring that will remain undelivered for a good month. Fruit trees are threatening to bud under this meek encouragement, and we are too.

This issue of Compass is entitled The Cheese Stands Alone after the last round of the children's game, Farmer In The Dell. In that game, after every other player has chosen a partner, one child is left behind as the cheese. No one ever wants to be the cheese, even though the rules for the game dictate that the last round's cheese gets to choose first in the next round as the farmer.

Our work is all about choice. The choices we make when we feel we have choices to make, but especially those we must make when we feel we have no options at all.

Not even the cheese really stands alone. Even the cheese is a part of a community that maintains a rhythm and insists upon continuing play.

May this issue remind you that your work might be more productively engaged in as play, however seriously responsible your profession might be.

Oh, and remember, you don't ever stand alone.

David Schmaltz & Amy Schwab



TRUE NORTH Compass

"The right stuff for your real world"

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The Cheese Stands Alone

Helping out at a local preschool, I asked a professional project manager to come in and organize an activity. I proposed a rousing session of Farmer In The Dell.

"So, what's the purpose of this activity?" the PM asked.

Thinking for a minute, I replied, "Fun!"

"That's a very subjective outcome," replied the PM. "How will you know that it's been successful?"

Taken aback, I considered, "Well, the kids will have had exercise. They will have had some playful interaction, and they'll be tired for their nap time."

"And if you had those outcomes, what would you have?" continued the PM. "I'm not trying to annoy you, I'm just trying to derive some objective success criteria."

"Hmmm," I pondered. "If I had those results, I would be satisfied?" I asked.

"And if you were satisfied, what would you have?" probed the PM, starting to annoy me, whether he was intending to or not.

"Where are we going with this?" I snorted, neglecting to hide my frustration. "I just want you to organize an activity. Farmer In The-freaking-Dell!"

"The first tenet of project management is 'start with the end in mind,'" replied the PM. "If we can't agree on objective and measurable conditions for completion, how can I manage this activity?" He paused for a moment before continuing. "Let me ask you this, when the activity is over, what will be standing that I can observe as evidence of completion?"

"The cheese."

"The cheese?" pondered the PM. "What's the cheese?"

"The cheese will be the child that hasn't been chosen in the last round," I explained. "You don't know Farmer In The Dell?"

It was clear that the PM had no previous experience organizing a rousing session of Farmer In The Dell, so I explained the basic moves. How the farmer picks a wife, the wife picks a child, and so-on, until the cheese stands alone.

"Well, so this is a sorting process," observed the PM. "The purpose seems to be to sort the children out into pairs. Farmer-wife, wife-child, child-nurse, and so on, until the cheese stands alone?"



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Cheese Stands Alone - Continued

"Correct," I sighed, relieved that we'd escaped from trying to more finely define the end result.

"How long do you want this activity to last," asked the PM, explaining that he was scoping the effort now. "Can't control the game if we don't know where the edges are," he quipped.

"About a half hour," I said, glancing at my watch. It was looking as if it might well take more time to plan this activity than to actually perform it.

"Check!" said the PM, scribbling again. "How many children will be involved?"

"About ten, depending."

"Depending upon what?"

"Depending upon how many children show up that day," I replied. "Might be nine, might be eleven. Could be as many as fifteen."

"This could be a problem," the PM noted. "If there are fewer than ten, we'll run out of resource before we ever achieve the cheese. You could end up with the rat standing alone, or something like that. If we have more than ten, the cheese might not end up standing alone at all."

"Fine. What do you propose we do about that?"

"I'll work out some scenarios and get back to you," mumbled the PM, jotting down more notes. "Now, what about risks?"

"Risks?" I squeaked.

"Yes, those areas of uncertainty with potential for disrupting play," continued the PM.

"Well, sometimes Johnny has to use the bathroom in the middle of an activity."

"Couldn't someone stumble with all of this circling going on?" cautioned the PM.

"Yes, it's happened."

"Scraped knee?" I nodded.

"I'll draft some contingencies. Any other risks?"

"Well, I suppose there's a risk that someone might get frustrated or even angry if they don't get chosen. No one likes to be the cheese."

"I'll take that into consideration when I layout the roles and responsibilities and make formal assignments," replied the PM.

Having run out of patience and time, and realizing that we had, indeed, spent half an hour planning a half hour's activity, I left the PM my phone number and email address, and agreed to meet the following day before the activity started. "Call me if you have any other questions," I invited as I scurried out of the room.

The PM called me three times that evening, "bouncing alternative strategies off me" to be sure he had the right one ready to "execute" the next day.

I arrived early the next morning to find the PM sorting through piles of paper. Looking up, he motioned me over to the side table and presented a seven page, single-spaced document, the cover page of which proclaimed in 48 point, bold font, "The Farmer In The Dell Project-- The Cheese Stands Alone," with a small graphic of a cheese wedge in the upper left corner. He asked me to review the document carefully and sign my acceptance on the back page.

I took the document to my office, poured a cup of coffee, and perused, astounded. The second page stated the objective in clear, unambiguous terms. The cheese, it declared, would stand alone!

Following pages detailed the time horizon with another attractive graphic, this one displaying a watch showing the finish time of ten thirty, and risks, including the location of first aid kits and phone numbers for a local trauma center, the fire department, an insurance adjuster, and the regional office of Homeland Security.

This guy had burned some serious midnight oil developing this plan!

Later pages outlined contingencies for configurations of from eight to fifteen children, including a detailed series of matrices, headlined Roles and Responsibilities. After studying them for a few minutes, then getting up for a refill on the coffee, I figured out that he had pre-determined who would be farmer, wife, child, nurse, cow, dog, cat, rat, and cheese, for eight iterations of the game, with contingency assignments if fewer or greater than ten children showed up. This matrix, alone, astounded me!

More Cheese, please? Next page!

Upcoming Events

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More Cheese!

Links to recent articles:

Percent Per Se

What's the square root of third place?

<http://tinyurl.com/2m4gc3>

Counting the Uncountable

"Managers don't punch a time clock because their work is not productively measured by the hour. So why are projects?"

<http://tinyurl.com/2qpmgx>

Let's Get Lost

"The effects of fleeing into early resolution are profound, and mostly lost on anyone basking in the satisfaction of finding themselves found."

<http://tinyurl.com/2u4ufa>

Irrational Requirements

"The surest way to fail, and fail spectacularly, seems to be to deliver exactly what the customer beforehand insists will make them happy. It rarely does."

<http://tinyurl.com/2tyesh>

Connections to Community

Stay connected! **Compass** comes out infrequently, but we're all over the place every day.

For more frequent infusions of the True North perspective, connect here:

Mastering Project Work Yahoo! group. Register here:

<http://tinyurl.com/2rlsjs>

David's Pure Schmaltz Blog

<http://tinyurl.com/23uyg9>

Amy's AmySchwab@Work blog:

<http://tinyurl.com/2q993c/>

The Cheese Stands Alone - continued

I stumbled into the activity room and spoke with the PM. "What's this master matrix all about?" I started.

"Just laying out the order of execution," he breezily replied, clearly impressed that I'd noticed his detailed planning.

"But how will the kids be able to follow this?" I asked. "They don't read!"

"Don't read?" the PM pondered. "Now, ... there's a risk we hadn't considered. We're out of scope already," he proclaimed. "No contingency planned for that one, either," he sighed.

"Couldn't you just let them choose for themselves?" I wondered. "After all, that's what the game's all about."

"One might think so if they hadn't really considered the purpose," he commented. "The game, as we determined, is about leaving the cheese standing alone. Balancing the risks with the short time frame, we could create confusion rather than fun, so I thought it prudent to pre-determine choice. It's really much more efficient this way, you know."

"Well, as I said, these kids can't read, so your matrix will be lost on them."

"Not a problem, I can color code instead."

"Color code?"

"Certainly, I'll just have each child wear a different color badge and rework the master role and responsibility matrix in color. Each child can follow along and know just exactly who to choose and when."

I wandered back to my office, secretly glad that I couldn't sign off on the master plan before it was updated with the color scheme. I was dreading activity time.

....

Activity time came, and the PM was busy explaining the game. The original roles had been redefined into colors, so the original story didn't make any sense to anyone. In compromise, the PM decided to change the game to The [insert appropriate color] In The Dell. Each kid was wearing a colored badge and held a color sheet, showing their moves. The first round began, with the PM leading:

"The green in the dell, the green in the dell, hi-ho the derry-o, the green in the dell."

Confused, Johnny, who was wearing the green badge, mouthed along.

"The green takes a ... Yellow!" continued the enthusiastic PM, shoving a hesitant Missy into the circle next to Johnny. "Hi-ho the derry-o, the green takes a yellow. ... The yellow takes a," started the PM, referring to his master sheet, "... blue," checking the circle of kids for the one wearing the blue badge and nudging him into the circle next to the yellow.

And so it went, iteration after meaningless iteration. In the fourth turn, I had to stand in for green while Johnny went to the bathroom. By ten thirty, everyone, including myself, was more than ready for nap time.

Visiting over a cup of coffee while the kids had their snack, the PM bubbled, "That was fan-tas-tic! I thought that by those last two rounds, the kids had almost gotten the hang of it."

I nodded sullenly. "They still seemed a little baffled," I noted. "Not a lot of giggling going on, did you think?"

"Well, they really didn't have time to develop full maturity with that process. That takes time. But for their level of competence, I thought they did really, really well. Did you see the orange standing alone there at the end?"

Stunned, speechless, I nodded into my mug. "I thought it was going to be a cheese standing alone," I mulled to myself.

"Call me any time you need an activity organized in the future," the PM giggled, "I just love managing projects! What are you planning for next week?"

"Chinese Checkers," I mumbled. "But I've already recruited an activity guide for that session," I quickly replied. I lied when I said I'd get back to him with future opportunities.

I felt almost exactly like a cheese, standing there all alone.

Moral:

Any serious professional is capable of taking their profession altogether too seriously!

"In the instant between perception and action, belief and behavior, lies the power to change the world."

Breaking Eggs

According to a possibly apocryphal story, several experienced engineers and architects vied for the honor of being the chief architect of Florence's now-famous dome atop their Cathedral. The design required constructing something wholly novel, and no proven methods existed for completing the work. Brunelleschi, who was a goldsmith by training, suggested a simple test to help the guild board choose: balance an unsupported egg on end. Each of the experienced architects and engineers failed in turn. Then the goldsmith approached the table, and cracking the end of an egg down onto the tabletop, left it standing unsupported, except by the flattened shell and egg white seeping from under it.

When the others protested that they could have solved the dilemma the same way, Brunelleschi noted that they hadn't. He won the competition and went on to successfully guide construction of the dome.



About Compass

Since 1996, Compass has been publishing dangerously sane ideas to a world-wide community numbering in the thousands.

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Who Cut The Cheese?

The guy at our local cheese shop, Cheese Louise, claims that those unsightly wounds on the wedge of Kern's Cheddar are called cheese bruises. He says that these might make my slab look ugly, but don't affect the flavor, texture, or edibility at all! He's right!

My kids and I used to play a silly little game we called Who Cut The Cheese? Before you steam off in a puff, lemme 'splain.

First, it's a word game. Has nothing to do with any ... humm ... bodily function.

Second, it's darned fun.

Third, it expands vocabulary. How bad can that smell?

Here's how to play: Start through the alphabet from A to Z, starting with "Who asked for the Asiago?" then proceeding on to, "Who bruised the Brie?" continuing on to, "Who curdled the Cheddar?" until you reach, "Who zoomed the Zamorano?"

I guarantee you'll be giggling your fool head off before anyone has mushed the Meunster, probably before anyone launches Limburger.

Look, our lives are altogether too serious to be taken too awfully seriously. Our work works better for everyone when we can find the space to play with it. and within it!

Years ago, my wife worked in a psychiatric hospital. The patients were really desperately ill, so the first time I attended an after work pizza and beer session with some of the staff, I was put off by the display of gallows humor about the "banana ranch." I later understood that humor was the only thing guarding the border between sanity and despair for the staff, and those who's border guard was dozing were sunk. No offense intended.

Maybe the best defense is a great offense, found in otherwise offensive humor.

Amy and I engage in what we call High Quality Consultant Humor. After a session focusing upon serious difficulties with a client, we often play a palate-cleansing round of *Who Cut The Cheese?* or some other silly little distractor until we can find our own wheels again. No offense intended, honest.

Appre-cheese-ations

Airedale Aaron Smith for Unlearning Project Management.

Asiago Ainsley and *Idaho* Goatser III for sharing their Sunday night stew.

Bleu Berrett Koehler for being the best possible publisher in the world for *The Blind Men*. *Still(ton)!*

Devonshire Dan Starr for feeling paranoid, too!

Double Gloucester Doug Ballon for going over the (w)edge with us.

Gjetost Gregory Howell for unplanned obsolescence.

Gornyaltajski Gert Heres, *Malvern* Marc, and *Mimolette* Maroesja Evers for an insightful, beautiful website and set-up!

Gruyere Guy Cook for watching our web presence,

Marscapone Mark Gray for putting up with my grouchy cold.

Muenster Matt Cato for not just sitting in.

Neufchatel Norm Kerth for remembering when, choosing how, and moving through!

The *pecorino* participants of our January 2008 Mastering Projects Workshop at Nike for slamming, dunking, and Just Doing It!

Petit Pardou Peggy Doherty for space for the journey, wonderful company, and midnight snacks.

... and ...

Yorkshire Blue **you** for reading this whole issue through!