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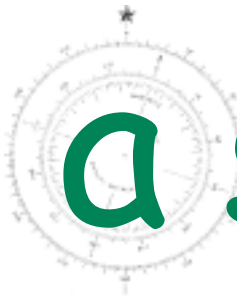
Heresy

"It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practice either of them." Mark Twain

The horrifying history of heresy should be enough to keep anyone from choosing the heretic's path. In the Middle Ages, heretics were punished with sentences ranging from public humiliation to dismemberment. The orthodoxy has always struggled with those who poke holes in official explanations, while the heretics have always struggled with the orthodoxy's short-sightedness. It's no different today than it's ever been.

Orthodoxies ossify. Their experience is defined by what was supposed to happen. They become bone rigid; strong, but brittle beyond their intended purpose. Heretics leap, threatening inflexible joints. Heretics speak their truth without considering its destructive effects. Although the orthodoxy might eventually forfeit its familiar status quo, the heretic pays dearly for each success.

As late as the 1830s, the leaders of the scientific orthodoxy believed that the effects of Noah's great flood explained most geology. When noted paleontologist Jean Louis Rodolphe Agassiz began reporting that prehistoric glaciation better explained the geology of Europe, his colleagues counseled him to go back to researching fossil fishes. Alexander von Humboldt, as recounted in John McPhee's wonderful In Suspect Terrain, said simply, "Your ice frightens me." Agassiz was shunned, even denied a University of Berlin professorship. Twenty five years later, the Geological Society of London warmly welcomed Agassiz and his "ice". Twenty years after that, they again denounced him as a charlatan. His beliefs gave him no security in his lifetime, even though they are commonly accepted knowledge now. Yesterday's heresy sometimes becomes today's orthodoxy.
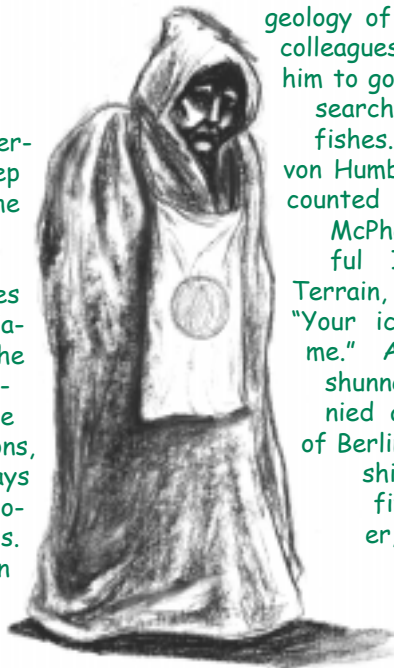
Anyone thinking for themselves travels a tough road. Society, now no less than ever, rewards compliant ones. Those accepting the explanations of their elders, betters, scientists, and saints might not make history, but they will make the mortgage payment.

Most heretics do not choose their role. Agassiz did not intend to discover glaciation; however, once his eyes focused in that way, he could no longer fail to see what had become for him simply obvious. Denying it became like denying himself. Frightened by his "ice," the orthodoxy considered him merely incorrigible, punishing him as if he were a deliberately disobedient child. He didn't want his insight anymore than they did.

Alarming Novelties

Galileo's discoveries were called "alarming novelties" in a time when science was supposed to confirm

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only things that had been eternally present. Scientists in his time were not supposed to discover novel perspectives and Galileo didn't intend to discover anything unusual. Speaking out of turn, his "ice" frightened his orthodoxy, too. The orthodoxy responded to his accidental discoveries by making decrees, declaring false what any fool could confirm as true.

This is how orthodoxy and heretic dance. Galileo's discoveries did not make him a heretic. His insistence upon speaking about them did. The orthodoxy responded by undermining their own position with absurd decrees. The heretic speaks and the orthodoxy oversteps its expertise. Galileo wore the heretic's mantle while society, more slowly than a lifetime could see, began changing itself around his new perspective.

What do these stories have to do with project work? Expectations easily become the unequivocal orthodoxy for a project. The client says "May 1st" and the project begins adoring May 1st with a nearly religious devotion. Then, the unintended discovery occurs. You stumble upon clear evidence that it cannot be May 1st. Unwanted choices present themselves. Twain reminds us that in this culture, our freedoms of speech and conscience are overridden by the social requirement for prudence enough to never practice either of them. Stating the obvious risks nearly certain vilification. Holding your own counsel promises short-term safety and longer-term deniability, perhaps at the cost of your own identity.

I'm not trying to be naive here. We shouldn't share all of our observations. Particularly troublesome are those insights which we feel we must share or forfeit our identity, but feel we cannot share without being cast as a heretic. We each have some of these chilling observations. I'd share one of mine, but it might give you an unwanted insight. I only very carefully share these with clients. These run so counter to most frames of reference that sharing them without adequate preparation can leave me cast as a heretic and worthless to my client.

This is the point in the article where the well-tempered author offers his top ten strategies for becoming a more effective heretic. I'm not going to do that for two reasons. First, my strategies may or may not help you. We're different people. Second, the subject is too complicated to be dispatched with a glib ten point plan. Coping with the heretic's dilemma is more like a life's work than a bump in the road.

Introducing the Heretic's Forum

"...but the evil is that they hold for certain that they are in the light." Giordano Bruno (famous heretic)

I have launched a new feature on the ProjectCommunity.com web site, the **Heretic's Forum**. The **Heretic's Forum** is a place for those of us struggling with our unintended role as heretic in our sometimes too orthodox organization. This forum is a simple means for sharing those stories and experiences that we feel we must share or bust, but which we suspect we cannot share without getting busted. It is a good place to ask questions and seek reassurance that you are not nearly as crazy as you sometimes feel. It serves as the campfire around which we can gather to share our ice and thaw out with our fellow heretics.

"This forum is a simple means for sharing those

stories and experiences that we feel we must share or bust, but which we suspect we cannot share without getting busted."

The **Heretic's Forum** uses the WikiWikiWeb technology developed by Ward Cummingham for his wildly successful Patterns Wiki. This unique technology allows ideas to cross index to create an intricate web. Completely unlike email discussion groups, sequence and time frame become irrelevant, taking back seat to the primary web of ideas. Visit the **Heretic's Forum** by either following the link behind the Community Steaming Mug 'O Joe icon from the ProjectCommunity.com home page or by entering this URL: <http://pc.wiki.net>. Read the brief introduction and follow the "OnePlaceToStart" link for instructions on entering your stories there. das

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Appreciations

Rene Abreo and **Mark Lewis** for finding a wrinkle and exploiting it.

Paul Sorenson for initiating a god-awful mess (which might be a blessing.)

The **Apple Sales Group** for deciding that it's going to be different.

Ed Reynolds for asking himself hard questions.

Mike Roberts for hearing heresy.

Lies My Vendor Told Me

"Project Management training is the most popular placebo in business today!"
Our Mastering Projects Workshop is a unique project management training experience. I wrote the workshop because I was deeply dissatisfied with the alternatives. In talking with colleagues and prospective clients, I heard similar dissatisfaction.

I finally concluded that Project Management training is the most popular placebo in business today. Almost everyone has been to one project management class and almost no one can trace to that experience any positive change in their project performance. Why is this?

Lies my Project Management Training Vendor Told Me

Showing Is Knowing- "This class will show you how to bring your projects in on time, on spec, and within budget."

Classes that promise transfer of skill by showing are almost always placebos. Adults are remarkably resistant to this type of instruction. Most of what makes a project work well cannot be "shown."

Automation Solves- "This class will show you how to dramatically improve your on time performance by using (insert the name of your favorite scheduling tool here.)"

More projects are hobbled by automated scheduling tools than are helped by them. All scheduling tools use the same raw material (your estimates) and the same algorithm, which calculates schedules wrong. Modest improvements are possible. Worth the cost?

Someone Else Is Doing It "Right"
"This workshop will show you how (insert the name of your favorite "dot com" monopolist here) brings their projects in on time, on budget, and on spec."

How does (insert your favorite "dot com" monopolist) do it so well? They don't. One recent book outlining one monopolist's strategy shows that what <u>they</u> call complete wouldn't pass for 2/3 done anywhere else! Their strategies are probably not applicable to your context and not worth emulating, anyway.

Process Maturity Is a Useful Project Target "This workshop will show you how to start moving up the process maturity ladder to improve customer satisfaction through the use of (insert the name of your favorite development methodology here.)"

What passes for process maturity in most project management contexts wouldn't rate as more than compulsive adolescent behavior in the rest of the real world.

Avoidance Is Possible "This class will show you how to avoid the conflicts and difficulties encountered by most projects."

The Ancient Greeks believed in the tendency for things to turn into their opposites. As a general rule, we get what we try to avoid. Strategies focused upon avoiding something often yield exactly the thing avoided.

This isn't an exhaustive list, but it identifies the major classifications. I'm confident that many of these vendors are so entranced with their own stories that they don't know that they are peddling lies. You should know better.

Mastering Projects Workshop is about you discovering what works for you. As long as the search for the solution to the "project management problem" is focused "out there," no resolution <u>can</u> be found. The best you'll get is the sort of hopeful travel that comes just before you discover that you've been cheated again.

I never know at the beginning of this workshop what participants will discover. Some folks leave angry at the unwanted insights or unexpected intrusions into what other vendors suggested were reasonable expectations. Some leave heretics; not because they sought heresy but because heresy discovered them.

What might constitute reasonable expectations? I'll address that question in the next issue. das

David's Notes

This has been a particularly difficult time in the history of True North project guidance strategies. You might have noticed a longer than usual time between Compass issues. We've been building infrastructure and redirecting energies. Both of these activities are dangerous for a consulting firm and should be avoided at all costs if it weren't for the inescapable fact that all of the alternatives are worse!

Our new website is up and operational. Check out **what's new** at www.projectcommunity.com. New Products, New Newsletter, New Relationships, New Learnings, New Possibilities. das

him: **Pdejager@year2000.com** for your free subscription.

About *Compass*

Compass is published periodically by *True North pgs, Inc.*, and is distributed free of charge to a project-oriented community.

Compass is a navigation tool for continuing your process of improving your project experience. *Compass* shares stories and insights to serve as the basis for you to provide more effective leadership to yourself and to your project's community. We enable each other to improve the quality of our project experiences through sharing our stories and our insights.

"You are
the most powerful
project management tool
you will ever use."
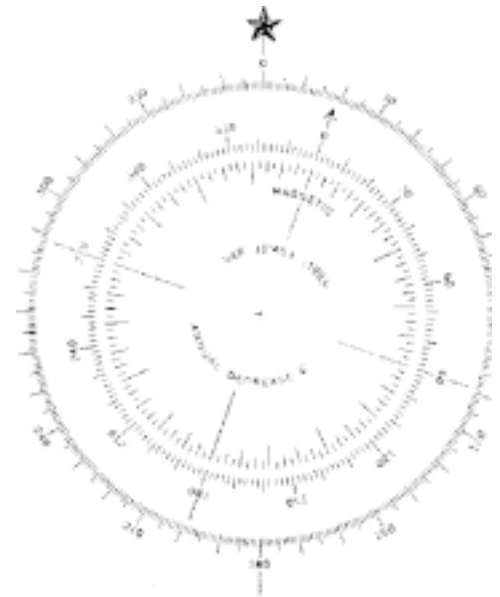
PSL Insighter

Problem Solving Leadership Workshop

vol. 1, no. 1 www.geraldmweinberg.com

LULLABY LANGUAGE

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People sometimes ask us for a list of "learnings from PSL." That's hard to do because PSL is so full of learnings, and the learnings are so individual. But there are patterns of PSL insights, and we're going to try to capture some of them to give a taste of what you might gain from a unique educational experience.

Perhaps the best part of such a list would be an accumulation of small things that add up to big results. Among the most common small learnings in PSL are learnings about language - a good example is what I call "lullaby language."

Lullaby language often comes up in PSL, but I don't want to take away any of the fun by revealing details of the simulations, so here's an example of lullaby language from one of my clients. Penny and Jeff were arguing over a key line in a requirements document:

The Catalog Department should deliver component pricing data by 1 February to the IT Department.

"There," said Penny, triumphantly. "There's my proof. We never promised to deliver that data that early."

"Yes you did," Jeff replied. "It's perfectly clear, right there. Should deliver by 1 February."

"Exactly," Penny countered. "It doesn't say we will, but only that we should. And we did try. But you computer people apparently don't appreciate the difficulty of getting every single one of those prices signed off by every person involved."

Well, I eventually got things cooled down, and we moved from blaming to problem-solving. The following are some excerpts from an on-the-spot workshop I created that was like the spontaneous sub-workshops that arise in PSL:

Should

I started the workshop with focus of their original problem, the nasty little word, "should." Jeff read the original statement as

The Catalog Department [must] deliver component pricing data by 1 February to the IT Department.

Penny, however, interpreted the "should" differently, as

The Catalog Department [will make every effort to] deliver component pricing data by 1 February to the IT Department.

What I taught them was a safer meaning, of "should" would be "probably won't," so the sentence reads,

The Catalog Department [probably won't] deliver component pricing data by 1 February to the IT Department.

"Oh," said Jeff, "if I'd realized that, we could have designed the project differently. Could Catalog have delivered parts of the pricing data by February 1?"

"Sure," said Penny. "We actually had about 90% of it by then, but that last 10% - mostly new items - took all the work."

"Ah. If only we'd known. We didn't need the entire table to proceed. Okay, next time we'll just let you know what we really need."

Just

Jeff had given me the perfect opening for the next lesson. "Sorry, Jeff," I said. That won't do."

"Why not?"

"Because you've managed to sneak in another one of those discounting words."

"What word?"

"Just." I went to the whiteboard and wrote what he said:

"Next time we'll just let you know what we really need."

"Now, what's the difference between that sentence and this one? I wrote:

"Next time we'll let you know what we really need."

"Well, it's the same thing, isn't it?"

Penny chimed in. "I get it. The 'just' makes it sound like there won't be any problems. It discounts the difficulty."

"Precisely. It's what I call a 'Lullaby Word.' Like 'should,' it lulls your mind into a false sense of security. A better translation of 'just' in Jeff's sentence would have been, 'have a lot of trouble to.'"

"I get it," Jeff said, coming to the board and snatching the marker from my hand. Then he wrote:

"Next time we'll [have a lot of trouble to] let you know what we really need."

"You know," he sighed, "I wish we'd had this little lesson last month. My second-best analyst up and quit on me, and I didn't see it coming. But a few weeks before, he told me, 'We haven't managed to hire another analyst yet, so I'm just working 80 hours a week until they do.' I should have heard him saying,

'We haven't managed to hire another analyst yet, so I'm [having a lot of trouble] working 80 hours a week until they do.'

He was trying to tell me that he was overloaded, but the 'just' lulled me into discounting his message. And, because I didn't hear him, he finally quit. Darn!"

Soon

Penny looked thoughtful. "I know another

Lullaby Word that got us into trouble."

"What's that?" Jeff asked.

"You remember when we didn't have the prices ready on February first, and you asked me when we would have them?"

"Sure, but I can't remember what your answer was."

"That's because it was a Lullaby. I said, 'Soon.' And what that means is..." She looked at me, and I nodded.

"I think it meant, 'I don't know, but don't keep bothering me.'"

"That's usually a pretty good translation," I confirmed.

Very

"Actually," Jeff chimed in, "what you said was 'very soon.'"

"Oh, great!" Penny said. "And what did that mean?"

"Adding 'very' is like adding a sleeping pill to the lullaby. It makes it even more certain that it's going to be a long, long time. Maybe never."

We spent a bit more time on the subject of lullaby words, with examples such as

Only: It's only a one line change. [That is, I didn't think much about what could go wrong.]

Anything: I didn't change anything. [That is, anything I thought was important.]

All: All I gotta do is … [A synonym for "just."]

There are many more lullaby words, but in effect, all tend to discourage feedback by putting both the speaker's and the listener's minds to sleep. And no feedback means that the meaning of the statement containing a lullaby word cannot be clarified. And, if it's not clarified, it can mean almost anything - and that's always the beginning of trouble. If you want to avoid such trouble, start converting lullaby words to alarm words - waking you up to potential misunderstanding, rather than lulling you to sleep. Just do it!

About the PSL Insighter

The PSL Insighter is published by Weinberg and Weinberg to share insights and to encourage attending our Problem Solving Leadership (PSL) workshop.For information about the workshop content,

schedule, cost, and location(s), see our website:

SUCCESSFUL REENTRY

a letter from a PSL graduate to PSL instructor, Pat Snipp)

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Pat, I want to thank you and David (Schmaltz) for the fine job you did in facilitating our seminar. I can report that I have been able to approach problem solving in a more effective manner as a result of our "moving" experience that week.

Specifically, among other things, I am more sensitive of:

1. the ubiquitous and slippery nature of problems -- they are everywhere, not simply technical, and refreshingly solvable in many different ways;

2. the importance of solving the problem in the most positive environment from a human point of view;

3. the utility of airing people's points of views before leaping on a solution;

4. the value of being generous -- that is, giving the benefit of the doubt even when maybe it isn't warranted "on the surface." Being generous is like putting medicine on a wound.

I have found already how useful it is to maintain calm among thunderstorms of emotion, and to try to get different mind sets re-oriented in a common direction, rather than "go for the win" and gain a loser in your group. When you do this your interaction pays dividends much beyond the immediate moment because you are (hopefully) building good will toward the next problem to solve.