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'Stuff' Clientek Says

PART 4: DON'T STAND THERE WITH YOUR TEETH IN YOUR MOUTH

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"Don't stand there with your teeth in your mouth"! Ok, let's be honest, this may not be a "Clientek" saying, but rather one of my own. It is actually a saying that I stole from my dad - it was his "polite" way of telling me to get to work! I do, however, think it illustrates a common problem we often see on software projects: the reluctance to start working or make decisions. This hesitancy is often hidden within process steps, approvals, reviews, and committees that are all required for a decision to be made.

How do you know if you have a "reluctant" environment? To answer that, I thought I would list out some common signs of reluctance and a few suggestions for how to help avoid that culture.

The first sign is poor communication between the business and IT units. When these groups rarely speak to one another, they can quickly lose track of what the other is doing, much less the overall release plan. Often these unit's primary communication is during requirements gathering or quarterly stakeholder meetings. Without daily interaction it is very

difficult to establish a level of trust in which reasonable discussions on how best to proceed can take place.

Another common sign is when IT does not want to share their release plan (or any target dates at all in some cases) in fear that the business will hold them to those dates regardless of any changes that occur. This highlights a deep lack of trust between the two organizations and can be a very difficult barrier to overcome.

The last sign I will discuss today is the fear of making decisions. This is often accompanied by a nebulous decision-making channel where everyone assumes their boss will make the decisions and fill them in (even though no one tells their boss they expect that). This is often made worse by the fact that no plan has been developed (sign two) to even understand the impacts of any decisions being made.

So how does one go about mitigating this fear and helping people feel like they can stop "standing with their teeth in their mouth"?

First, begin meeting with your business partners regularly. At Clientek we require a business representative be on each project and available daily to discuss issues with the team and help clarify requirements and business goals. Without this, the next two steps become more and more difficult to accomplish as this is where we are establishing trust.

Second, IT must create a plan and review it with the business as soon as possible. Keep in mind, it will likely be wrong and draw a poor response, but this is its goal. It elicits feedback from our business partners so that we are both invested in and aligned on the plan.

Third, decompose your plan into the smallest features possible. This will help to make decisions and potential mistakes smaller. It also helps make things easier to understand and typically aids in delivering value sooner.

Ultimately, a “reluctant” culture is not instilled by process, its instilled by people, by leaders, and how they respond to change and mistakes. The greatest process in the world can be completely nullified if leaders don’t trust their teams and give them the freedom to make decisions and mistakes.

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