

It's Quitting Time

New Year Resolutions for Program Managers

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Happy 2005, everyone! As a new year dawns, people across this great land are practicing the time-honored tradition of making resolutions they firmly intend to keep ... at least until January 4. In the spirit of reform and transformation, I humbly offer for your consideration the following list of *Things To Quit in 2005*.

Quit sawing with paintbrushes

This resolution points out the importance of matching tools and talent to the job at hand. The best paintbrush in the world makes a terrible saw. As much as some people and organizations hate to admit it, human beings are seldom interchangeable. For example, all engineers are not equally gifted in every activity or discipline. Some are better suited to particular work than others. Similarly, some processes are appropriate for Project A but not for Project B. The one-size-fits-all approach may work for t-shirts or socks (though often enough it doesn't), but taken too far, it may serve up the wrong person/process/tool for the job.

The point is to focus on the actual talents, traits, and procedures that a project requires, rather than simply to rely on certifications, credentials, and management models, as if all engineers or accountants were identical or as if waivers were never necessary. I may have painted a great picture with that brush last year, but if this year's mission is to cut logs, I'd better go find a saw.

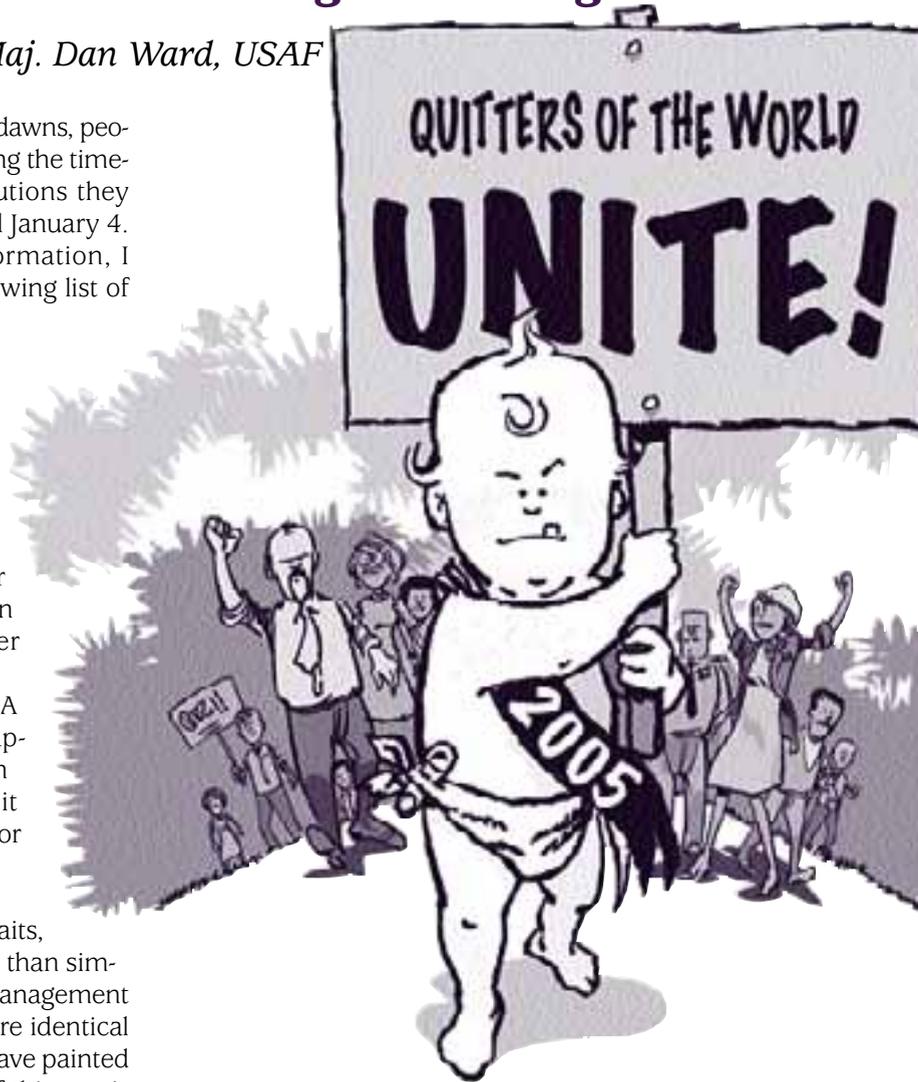
Quit insisting on perfection

G.K. Chesterton famously observed, "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly." That is to say, if a thing is worth doing, it is simply worth doing, even if we aren't as good at it as we might like to be. An inability to perform perfectly is no excuse for not performing at all. I am not advocating sloppiness—except when the only alternative is to do nothing.

It's often said that "good enough is the enemy of the best." We ought not settle for adequate when excellent is called

for, and I am glad the Air Force has identified "excellence in all we do" as a core value. However, the best is sometimes the enemy of the good enough, and an insistence on bestness may have a negative mission impact because of the time, effort, and resources required to get there.

Perfectionists are some of the most frustrated and unhappy individuals around because perfection is so rare. If perfection is the only thing that satisfies, satisfaction will be elusive. And quite frankly, perfection is often unnecessary. What many of our customers need is something that works well (if not perfectly), and they need it soon. They can wait for the bells and whistles later—a



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scenario that the spiral development model is well suited to address. So spiral away, and forget the old school, Big Bang theory of delivering 100 percent solutions tomorrow when our customers need 80 percent today.

Quit reading all your e-mail and answering all your phone calls

If your inbox is anything like mine, it attracts its share of messages that simply don't need to be read. Go ahead and delete them. While you're at it, quit answering the phone every time it rings, and quit going to meetings that don't have agendas or objectives. As a matter of principle, make it a point to ignore some percentage of the dings, beeps, and squeaks that clamor for your attention each day.

Just because someone calls, e-mails, or invites you to a meeting doesn't mean you have to answer, read, or attend. The person in charge of your day ought to be you (or your boss), but all too often we tend to delegate that responsibility to anyone who happens to stumble across our contact information. If you're in the middle of an important task, let your voicemail handle an untimely call. My philosophy at home is that I have a phone for my convenience, not anyone else's. I'm paying the bill, after all. So if I don't want to interrupt my family dinner, I let the answering machine get it, and I return the call—if it's worth returning—when it is convenient for me. Similarly, I contend that I know best whether right now is a good time to interrupt my work for a phone call. So far, I have not run across an issue that caused the world to end because of a five-minute delay.

Trust your e-mail inbox to faithfully store new messages while you wrap up whatever meaningful activity you are currently engaged in. E-mail may get delivered in seconds, but it doesn't have to be read that quickly.

Quit drinking coffee out of a fire hose

Tom Demarco wrote a fascinating book titled *Slack*, which is aimed at debunking "the myth of total efficiency." Focused primarily on knowledge workers, DeMarco argues that slowing down and intentionally creating downtime actually increases productivity. Other writers have addressed similar approaches to "the tyranny of the urgent," so this concept is not entirely without precedent. DeMarco observes, "Organizations sometimes become obsessed with efficiency and make themselves so busy that responsiveness and net effectiveness suffer." Simply put, there is a difference between being busy and being productive.

Somewhere between working 40 hours and working 80 hours, efficiency and effectiveness drop off. Parkinson's

law states that work expands to fill the time allotted. If work is expandable, it is also (up to a point) compressible. If I must get something done by 5 p.m., I inevitably find a way to get it done. On the other hand, if I know I have to stay until 7 p.m. anyway, I find my hours feel just as full, even when I don't necessarily produce much more.

Some things are meant to be sipped and savored, rather than gulped and chugged. And sometime the quickest path forward involves throttling back a little, slowing down, and getting out of the firehose's stream. Don't let this year go by without making time to read, to think, to explore, to play, to learn a new skill. Have some fun, get some exercise, catch your breath—and then see if your overall effectiveness doesn't increase.

Quit focusing on technology and money

Technology and funding are important aspects of a PM's job, no question. But however interesting and valuable a particular technology or budget line may be, its value is orders of magnitude below that of the people on your program team. PMs certainly need to be technically astute and financially savvy, but their primary focus needs to be on the people who make up the team.

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This focus has at least two dimensions. One is the care and feeding of your program team, and that includes awards and recognition as well as a day-to-day awareness of the team's challenges, issues, and achievements. The other dimension is the team members' professional development, which can be stunted if the PM doesn't delegate an appropriate level of responsibility and activity to each individual.

The people part of a PM's job has few clear-cut solutions. For that matter, it often has few clear-cut problems, which makes it even harder. Sad to say, many PMs choose to focus on the easier, more concrete technical and financial tasks to the detriment of both the team and the program. The PMs who instead focus on taking care of their people and helping them grow, usually find their technical and financial challenges get much easier.

Quit making improvements

The German word *Schlimmbesserung* does not have a direct English equivalent, but roughly translated it means

2005 Reading List

AS THE FUTURE CATCHES YOU

Juan Enriquez

A poetic and prophetic look at the political, ethical, economic, and technical implications of the imminent revolution in genomics

BOYD

Robert Coram

A riveting biography of the most influential military thinker of the recent past, Air Force Col. John Boyd

FASTER

James Gleick

Examination of the "acceleration of just about everything" in today's world

JUST FOR FUN

Linus Torvalds

The fascinating story of Linux, as told by its creator

LOVE AND PROFIT

James Autry

A collection of insightful, human essays about leadership and business

ORBITING THE GIANT HAIRBALL

Gordon MacKenzie

An enlightened and enlightening primer on creativity, written by the former "Creative Paradox" of Hallmark Cards

RE-IMAGINE

Tom Peters

Fast paced and hard-hitting, Peters once again sounds the call for excellence in an age of change

THE HACKER ETHIC

Pekka Himanen

Traces the development of the work ethic from pre-Reformation Europe through today's open source developers

THE TIPPING POINT

Malcolm Gladwell

Illuminates the process of contagion from epidemics and crime to fashion trends and political ideas

THE UNFINISHED REVOLUTION

Michael Dertouzos

A clear, comprehensive argument for where the Information Technology revolution should be headed

"improvements that make things worse." Aside from the obviously bad improvements we may encounter (like accidentally breaking a knob off the device you were trying to repair), many a *Schlimmb* is actually quite subtle: for example, taking a team's dynamic, creative approach to a problem and turning it into a repeatable, checklist-driven process—then forcing the original team to use the watered-down checklist, no deviations allowed. The acme of subtle non-improvements is when a team's goals are focused on repeating the past with only small gains, rather than challenging them to seek new heights.

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Management über-guru Tom Peters constantly rails against an over reliance on a kaizen methodology and its insistence on continuously pursuing small, incremental improvements. Instead of minor improvements, Peters proclaims "the destruction imperative" and dedicates a whole chapter in his book *Re-Imagine* to this concept. As he puts it, "Mediocre successes may be just fine ... for mediocre times. But these are not ... mediocre times." That is true for just about every enterprise we encounter these days. Improvements are simply not adequate. What we need is creative destruction.

It's a brand new day

Perhaps one of the reasons the New Year's Resolution tradition has persisted in spite of our frequent failure to keep the resolutions we make, is that everyone craves a goal. Without an explicit, forward-leaning, important, and exciting goal, we tend to default into survival mode, where getting through the day intact becomes our sole objective. That's not exactly a formula for meaningful success.

So make sure you and your team have some goals and resolutions for the new year. Post them somewhere prominent. Discuss them. Act on them.

And whatever else you're quitting, make this the year you don't quit on your resolutions.

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