

Local Business - Welcome new columnist Stephen Balzac



Right to Midnight

By Stephen Balzac

"Left or right?"

"Right to Midnight."

I had this conversation recently with my 3.5 year old son. We were in the car, and he had just dropped his favorite stuffed animal, a black cat named Midnight. He couldn't reach it, and I was feeling around trying to find it for him, while he kept telling me I was near Midnight. When I finally tried asking him if I should move my hand left or right, his response was that I should move my hand, "right to Midnight."

Now the fact is, a 3.5 year old doesn't really understand that I don't know what he knows: after all, he can see my hand and the cat, therefore I should know which way to move. This sort of thing is not at all unusual with young children. For the most part, it's generally pretty funny.

It's much less funny when senior management is in the role of the 3.5 year old, and the employees or customers are trying to figure out what is going on. Young children haven't yet learned to consider other perspectives; management, on the other hand, doesn't have that excuse.

Many people are familiar with companies that put out products with incomprehensible interfaces or unreadable documentation, and then become highly irate when the customers complain that they can't figure out how to use the product. I worked with one high tech company where the CEO and engineering team routinely described their customers, primarily research scientists, as a bunch of incompetent idiots. They simply could not understand why their customers could not understand how to use the product. After all, the CEO and the engineers understood it.

Fortunately, very few people are going to argue that a company needs to get input from its customers and involve them in the design process. After all, that's the best way to make sure you're giving them something that they'll be happy to spend money on. The real problem arises when the company's internal communications are lacking. It is, sadly, not at all unusual for management and engineering, or engineering and sales, or any other combination of departments to be talking past each other. The groups are nominally all working for the same

Local Club Meetings/Notes

Ayer/Shirley Lions Club - General Meeting at the Nashoba Club Restaurant in Ayer on the 4th Monday each month. Social hour at 6pm/meeting 6:30pm. New members welcome.

Ayer/Shirley/Harvard/Devens Rotary Club meeting at the Bull Run Restaurant, Route 2A, Shirley, MA every Thursday at 6:00 p.m. For more info contact President Dave Swain at 978-425-4311.

Groton-Pepperell Rotary Club - The Groton-Pepperell Rotary Club meets on Thursdays at 12:15 at the Groton Country Club, Lovers Lane, Groton. Call Martha Campbell @ 978-448-1170.

Nashoba Valley Amateur Radio Club - meet on the third Thursday of each month, excepting July and August, at 7:30 PM at the Pepperell Community Center.

Pepperell VFW Ladies Auxiliary - 3rd Monday of the month at 6:30pm at the home post on Leighton St. Always looking for members, support and new ideas. email durno69@juno.com

Rotary Club of Lunenburg - Townsend - Mondays, except holidays, at the Bootlegger Restaurant, 50 Mass. Ave (route 2A) Lunenburg at 6:15pm. Call Jim Hays at 978-582-7235.

The Rebekah - Middlesex Lodge 176 - 1st and 3rd Tuesday each month at the Grange on Champney Street, Groton, Ma at 6:30 pm. We welcome everyone, you may contact: Natalie MacLeod @ 978-512-9738 or by email at sweetnatty58@hotmail.com

Townsend Lions Club - 1st Tuesday of the month at the Congregational Church meeting room 6:30p. Dinner meeting the 3rd Tuesday of the month at the Townsend House Restaurant at 6:30 pm. We welcome those interested in joining us.

Twin City Toastmasters: - Twin City Toastmasters meets every Tuesday evening at 7 p.m. at the Ronald M. Ansin Foundation Offices in downtown Leominster, MA. There is no fee for guests and you may attend as many times as you wish. For more info please call club president, Peter at (978) 227-0044.

Since its founding in 1924, Toastmasters International has helped four million men and women develop their public speaking skills and become confident communicators at work, at home, and yes, even at parties. Toastmasters now has approximately 200,000 members and 10,000 clubs in 90 countries. Twin City Toastmasters is one of more than 120 clubs in Massachusetts. www.twincitytoastmasters.com

company, but none are capable of recognizing that the others don't know what they know or cannot imagine that different groups within the company have different, equally valid, priorities.

Engineers, for example, are most concerned with building elegant, effective solutions to problems. Salesmen want to sell product. Documentation wants to describe what the product does. Customer support wants to help the customer actually use the product. Managers are trying to meet deadlines and generate revenue for the company. It would seem that everyone is on the same page. The reality, though, is far different. The engineer's elegant solution may be brilliant, but impractical: for example the engineer who suggested driving bolts into the side of my house to hold up a sunshade for an afternoon. While that would have solved the immediate problem, it was just a bit of overkill and could easily have caused other problems down the road. Salesmen may promise features that engineering can't implement or management, in an effort to close a deal, might set overly aggressive deadlines. A case in point occurred in one company I dealt with, when the CEO turned to the VP of Engineering and asked when the product would be ready to ship.

"September 1st," said the VP.

The CEO turned back to the phone and said, "We'll have it for you on July 15th."

The CEO simply could not understand why engineering couldn't have the product done by July 15th, and the VP of Engineering simply could not understand why the CEO couldn't accept September 1st. The net result was that the product ended up shipping on October 1st, delayed by a constant series of unmeetable deadlines.

When I'm telling this story, someone always says to me that the two people simply needed to communicate better. True, but not very useful. If it were simple, they would have done it. Under the pressure to get a product out the door, each one forgot to stop and get the full picture. Their frames of reference narrowed to the point where they could not imagine any other answer than the one they had locked onto. Whether two people or ten people are involved, it's important to stop and ask four critical questions:

1. What do I know that they do not know?
2. What do they know that I do not know?
3. Do I actually have enough information to make a decision?
4. Are we really all on the same page?

Taking the other person's perspective can pay off in a big way. What's stopping you?

Stephen Balzac is a consultant and professional speaker. He is president of 7 Steps Ahead (www.7stepsahead.com), based in Stow, MA. Contact him at 978-298-5189 or steve@7stepsahead.com.

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