

Sir CEO and the Green Knight

Stephen R Balzac

One fine day, Arthur, the CEO rode forth upon his trusty steed. At his side hung his magic sword, Expostfacto. Expostfacto was widely considered to be a sword with a sharp legal mind. Arthur had made his fortune renting camels, which he parked every day in a large camel lot.

The sun was shining. The birds were singing. Suddenly, a dragon came roaring out of the sky, heading straight for Arthur. Flame billowed from the dragon's mouth. Arthur drew his sword and with one swift blow, buried the dragon in a shower of subpoenas.

So it went, as Arthur spent many days enjoying the freedom of facing foes instead of sitting in stultifying board meetings, where, regretfully, it was seen as déclassé to employ the full might of Expostfacto upon annoying board members or customers. Against the power of Expostfacto, each foe swiftly fell under a massive pile of paperwork.

So it went until the day that Arthur encountered Maldive, the Green Knight.

“None shall pass!” quoth Maldive.

Many blows were exchanged, with Expostfacto screaming its legendary battle cry, “Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet,” a phrase which has become familiar to all internet users. Eventually, though, with a mighty blow, Arthur struck Maldive's head from his shoulders. That should have ended the fight right then and there, but Maldive was an internet marketing scheme. He simply put his head back on and continued the fight. Eventually, Maldive knocked Expostfacto to one side, and placed the point of his sword at Arthur's throat.

“I could slay you now,” said he. “But on your honor, I will spare you if you can answer this question: What does every engineer desire? Swear on Expostfacto that



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you will return in a month. If you have the answer, you will live. If not, you die.”

Ignoring Expostfacto's muttered comments on possible loopholes and the inadvisability of signing anything, Arthur took the oath to return in a month with the answer or without it.

Arthur rode across the land searching for an answer to the question. He called together all his senior managers and asked them, to no avail. He even posted the question on Twitter and Facebook, leading to some very interesting answers and suggestions, particularly from certain ex-politicians in New York and California. However, since Maldive had asked about engineers, Arthur knew those answers couldn't be true because an engineer wouldn't know what to do with one even if he found someone willing to go on a date.

By day 29, things were looking quite bleak for Arthur. As he rode through the frozen lands of Nadir, he encountered a strange looking man. The strange thing was that the man did not appear to be in a rush. As a CEO, Arthur was quite used to people rushing around

following his orders. He could always tell when things were getting done by how much people were rushing.

“Who are you?” asked Arthur, puzzled at the sight of someone so calm and relaxed.

“Merlin,” was the reply.

“Merlin the Magician?” asked Arthur.

“No, Merlin the consultant. What seems to be a problem?”

“Nothing, nothing at all,” said Arthur who, like most CEOs, became very cautious at the sight of a consultant.

“Good,” said Merlin, who turned back to whatever he was doing, completely ignoring Arthur. This was a very unusual experience for Arthur, who was not used to being ignored by anyone.

After several minutes, Arthur said, “Well, I guess I’ll be on my way.”

There was no response.

“I’m going now,” said Arthur.

There was no response.

Arthur started to ride away. There was still no response from Merlin, who seemed quite happy to let Arthur leave. Arthur had not ridden very far before he stopped and turned back.

“Do you know what every engineer wants?” asked Arthur.

“Why do you ask?” replied Merlin.

Before long, Arthur was telling Merlin exactly why he wanted to know and what would happen if he didn’t find out. I wasn’t long before a price was agreed upon and Arthur had his answer.

“That’s it?” exclaimed Arthur. Reflecting on it further, he said to himself thoughtfully, “But that’s what everyone wants!”

The next day Arthur showed up at the appointed time for his meeting with Maldive.

“Well?” said Maldive.

“Is it money?” said Arthur.

“No.”

“Is it a fast car?”

“No.”

“Sex?”

“We’re talking about engineers,” responded Maldive. “If that’s the best you can do, then prepare to die.”

“Wait,” said Arthur. “What engineers want is the freedom to make their own decisions.”

There was a long silence.

“I see you encountered Merlin,” growled Maldive. “Very well. But I doubt you will learn from this experience!”

And so Maldive turned and rode away.

The strange thing was that the man did not appear to be in a rush. As a CEO, Arthur was quite used to people rushing around following his orders. He could always tell when things were getting done by how much people were rushing.

Arthur, meanwhile, departed for home in a very thoughtful mood. What, indeed, did it really mean that people want to make their own decisions? Obviously, if he allowed all his employees to make their own decisions, surely chaos would result. No one would know what anyone else was doing! There would be no coordination between departments.

The moment Arthur returned to his office, he discovered the true meaning of chaos. Thousands of emails needing his attention; projects stalled because he hadn’t been around to tell people what to do; irate customers complaining

about badly maintained camels (even camel renters have some expectations!); employees angry and frustrated because they couldn’t get anything done in his absence.

“I knew I should never have taken a vacation,” Arthur thought ruefully to himself. “This happens every time! It’s even worse than when I’m in a meeting or on a call.”

As Arthur dove into sorting out the confusion that came about from his taking his guiding hands off the corporate reins, he kept wondering how much worse it could really be if he allowed his employees to make their own decisions. Would it really be worse than what he dealt with every day? Arthur decided to

experiment: instead of solving the problems in one department, he gave them limited decision making power. They could approve all expenditures, including customer returns or gifts, up to a fixed amount. After a couple of false starts as everyone got used to the new arrangements, Arthur found that that department was suddenly taking up much less of his time and energy. Moreover, the increased productivity of his employees more than made up for the occasional decisions that Arthur might have made differently. Indeed, simply by building some structure, Arthur found he could permit much more freedom and limit the downside of the occasional mistake, and create almost unlimited upside. At the same time, he also found that he could now focus much more on the strategic direction of his company instead of spending all his time putting out fires.

Best of all, as Arthur spread these changes throughout his company, he found that work didn't come to a halt whenever he wasn't available. Productivity increased because employees no longer needed to look busy in order to appear to have a purpose; instead, they could actually engage in purposeful activity. Sure, there were still moments of frustration, but on the whole, employees were happier and more motivated than he had ever seen them. Motion does not equal progress, Arthur realized. Progress equals progress.

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In the end, the ability to give people the freedom to work as they would like to work comes from building the structure to enable them to know what to do.

Without structure, there may a lot of motion, but very little progress. What will you do to change that?

Stephen Balzac is a consultant and professional speaker. He is president of 7 Steps Ahead (www.7stepsahead.com), an organizational development firm focused on helping businesses get unstuck and transform problems into opportunities. Steve is a contributing author to volume one of "Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play." Steve's book, "[The 36-Hour Course on Organizational Development](#)," published by McGraw-Hill, is available at Amazon.com, Barnes and Noble, and other book stores. Contact him at 978-298-5189 or steve@7stepsahead.com.