

## The Engines Cannae Take Much More...

*Stephen R Balzac*

Imagine for a moment Mr. Scott giving his famous, “Captain, the engines cannae take much more of this,” line and Kirk responding, “No problem, Scotty. You take a break and I’ll fix the engines.” Even for Star Trek this would be ludicrous. Kirk may be pretty smart, but he’s not the master engineer that Scotty is. It makes no sense for him to try to do Scotty’s job; that’s what he has Scotty for. Oddly enough, Star Trek is one of the few places where this scenario never happens.

Where does this scenario play out? In far too many businesses. I am always fascinated when a manager tells me that he would never ask his employees to do something that he couldn’t do. What is the point of having a team? A team that limits itself to the abilities of the leader is not really a team. It’s a group of henchmen who may be good at carrying out instructions, but who are not capable of achieving high levels of creativity or performance. It would be like Kirk refusing to order Scotty to fix the engines because Kirk can’t do it himself.

In an effective team, the abilities of the team are greater than the sum of the individuals. It is the capacity of the team to work as a unit, to be able to put the right person or subset of people in the right place to deal with problems that makes the team strong. Fictional though they are, the crew of the Enterprise is an effective team exactly because they know how to put the right people in the right place at the right time. While it certainly helps to have a cooperative script writer, the fact is that the level of teamwork that they demonstrate is not fictional at all. It is something that all teams can achieve, for all that barely one in five actually do.

To bring this into the real world, or at least as real as the software industry gets, I worked once with a software company that had the idea that every engineer should become expert in every other person’s



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code. Unfortunately, this was a fairly large project and the different pieces required different areas of highly specialized knowledge. Each of the engineers had spent many years building up that expertise and could not simply transfer it to every other engineer. While having partners working together makes a great deal of sense, trying to have everyone doing everything is self-defeating. It sacrifices the benefits that come from applying specialized knowledge to specific problems.

However, this was not nearly as dysfunctional as the suggestion by one senior manager at a high tech company that part of having everyone in the company better understand one another’s jobs, each person should spend time doing each of the other jobs. When it was pointed out that engineers are not always the most socially adept people, and that perhaps having the engineering team trying to market to customers wasn’t the best choice, his response was, “Then they need to learn.” When it was pointed out that marketing and sales professionals, talented as they are, generally are not trained engineers, he had the same response. Fortunately, wiser heads prevailed: while those

engineers who wanted to become more involved in customer facing activities were given the opportunity to do so, the engineers did not end up trying to sell the product and the sales force did not end up attempting to build it.

Now, the fact is, this manager did have a point. Helping people to become more knowledgeable about one another's jobs is important. If you understand just a little about what other people are doing, you have a much better sense of what is a reasonable request and what is not, what you can do that will help them accomplish their jobs, and what you can do to help them to help you do your job.

So how do you develop that level of mutual helping? Different people bring different skills to the project. The more people can get to know one another, to appreciate the perspectives, experiences, and ideas that each one brings, the more they will start to come together as a team. The leader

needs to set the example that asking for help is not a sign of weakness and accepting help is not a sign that you can't do your job. It is exactly because you have multiple perspectives and approaches, multiple skill sets and ideas, that the team becomes strong.

***The leader must be the first one to acknowledge that the reason there is a team in the first place is because the leader can't do it all himself. If he could, why is anyone else there?***

The leader can do this by, well, leading. Not by ordering or threatening or attempting to coerce people, but by demonstrating the behavior that he wants other people to engage in. The leader must be the first one to acknowledge that the reason there is a team in the first place is because the leader can't do it all himself. If he could, why is anyone else there? Whether it's Captain Kirk trying to run the Enterprise single-

handedly or one man trying to play all nine positions on a baseball team, a leader who can't accept help is not a leader.

What are you doing to help your team members help you?



*Stephen Balzac is a consultant and professional speaker. He is president of 7 Steps Ahead ([www.7stepsahead.com](http://www.7stepsahead.com)), an organizational development firm focused on helping businesses to increase revenue and build their client base. 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](mailto:steve@7stepsahead.com).*