



# The Effective Organization

May 2009

## Right To Midnight

“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 company, but none are capable of recognizing that the others don't know what they know or cannot imagine that different groups within the

## Upcoming Events

May 18: *How to Speak so CEOs will Listen* Sponsored by the [Society of Professional Consultants](#).

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## Publications

[“Maintaining Motivation”](#)

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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.

## About 7 Steps Ahead



Stephen R. Balzac is a consultant, professional speaker and president of 7 Steps Ahead, specializing in helping businesses increase revenue and grow their client base.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

He serves on the boards of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer. Steve is an adjunct professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology and has been a guest lecturer at MIT and WPI.

Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and applying sport psychology techniques to business have been some of his most successful projects.

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 1<sup>st</sup>," said the VP.

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

The CEO simply could not understand why engineering couldn't have the product done by July 15<sup>th</sup>, and the VP of Engineering simply could not understand why the CEO couldn't

accept September 1<sup>st</sup>. The net result was that the product ended up shipping on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 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?

**If you're thinking continuous improvement, you're thinking...**

