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Should Your Projects' Leaders Be on Springer?

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This issue of CROSSTALK focuses on software projects that fail. Process improvement programs can help a software program succeed. They can also help it fail. Process improvement programs have the potential to be dysfunctional for their own reasons. To help put this in perspective, I chose to look at the ringmaster of dysfunction, Jerry Springer. This article draws a parallel between the problems faced by process improvement programs to the experiences related on The Jerry Springer Show.

Process improvement programs face a number of challenges within an organization. These challenges can include fickle or uncaring sponsors, strange behavior, and process envy. Such dysfunctional behaviors reflect the personalities and culture of the organization. Any organization is a miniature version of society as a whole. In order to gain some insight into the effects of dysfunctional behavior in an organization, let us turn to the best demonstration of dysfunction in our society, *The Jerry Springer Show*. This article will relate some of the dysfunctional behavior seen on the *Springer* show that sabotages relationships to the resistance and strange behavior that can sink a process improvement program.

Sponsors

Many articles and presentations on successful improvement programs talk about the importance of sponsorship. Involved and active sponsorship is critical to process improvement efforts. If the sponsor gets involved, others in the organization notice and play along. There are two types of sponsor behaviors that can hurt an improvement effort: cheating and a lack of attention.

The Springer show routinely features cheating spouses. Invariably, they bring their new lover on the show and a fight ensues. Feelings are hurt and the relationship is never the same. In the process improvement world, cheating spouses relate to sponsors that jump from improvement idea to improvement idea. Reading too many airline magazines often causes this problem. A sponsor will profess his love for Capability Maturity Model IntegrationSM (CMMI[®])-based process improvement one day, staff an improvement program, and ask his managers to join in. Then, while the sponsor is on a business trip, a new improvement program catches his eye. Maybe it is Lean Six Sigma. Maybe it is the Balanced Scorecard. Suddenly that

CMMI book just does not look the same. Its cover isn't as shiny and his attention wanders. The rest of the organization will notice this and follow his lead. This can lead an organization down a long road of shifting from one improvement effort to another, and it does not take long for the organization to see improvement efforts as shallow and pointless. It takes the full commitment of the sponsor to win the hearts and minds of the organization.

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Even if sponsors remain committed to a single improvement program, they can lose focus. If that happens, subordinate managers who never really bought into the improvement program will see an opportunity to resist changing their behavior. Organizations that focus on the grade for a CMMI appraisal are especially susceptible to this behavior.

Another regular event on the *Springer* show involves parents who are suddenly confronted with the unexpected and wild behavior of their children. They say things like, “He’s always been such a good child.” Then the child comes out dressed as a vampire or wearing a diaper and brings

out his or her equally bizarre friends. At one time, these were probably good, attentive parents. However, as the children grew older and started hanging out with their friends and pursuing other interests, the parents felt their job was done and turned to other interests of their own.

This type of inattentive parenting equates to sponsors and managers who rush to put improvements in place to get the grade. The sponsor pays close attention while the process is growing up, but can easily become content once the target grade level is achieved. The sponsor may forget that the improvements came about because of their involvement. Once the grade is achieved, the sponsor may turn attention to more pressing matters with the expectation that things will not change. Project managers not committed to continuing improvement will begin to stop following the processes they do not like or do not see as important. While the sponsor is saying, “It has always been a good project. It’s Level 3, you know,” things suddenly start to change. The project starts to miss deadlines, and status reports lose their clarity and validity. Customers start complaining and the sponsor cannot understand what went wrong. Sponsors need to continue to stress the importance of good processes and support their Quality Assurance (QA) group, which can often be the first source of information when a project’s behavior turns strange. A well-established and supported QA group can be a surrogate parent to make sure the projects continue to follow their processes as intended.

Project Managers

Project managers play an integral role in continuing improvement efforts. Successful improvements require cascading sponsorship that flows from the sponsor through the higher levels of management down to the practitioners. Unfortunately, many mid-level managers resist improvement and the changes

associated with it.

On the *Springer* show, many of the conflicts stem from the refusal of one person to commit to a long-term relationship. Promises of marriage never result in a trip to the altar. Eventually, one of the people in the relationship strays. Then, they show up on *Springer* with a new love (or two) and a fight ensues. Managers who resist often say the right things in the presence of the sponsor, but never fully commit to making improvements. Like the proposal that never comes, the improvements are constantly delayed. Some small change may be made when sponsors are looking, but the managers never commit when left on their own. If the sponsor does not press the issue, the desired change will not happen.

Cross-dressers often make appearances on the *Springer* show. These people present one face to the public while behaving very differently behind closed doors. The *Springer* show lets them expose their true selves on national television. Projects often behave the same way. It is not unusual for a project to develop a lot of process documentation and store it on their organization's repository for all to see. They might even make a big show of producing the documentation. The public face looks the way it should; however, when a closer look is taken, the documentation is all for show. The project continues to behave the way it always did without making the changes that were documented. This often happens when a project tries to write documentation that matches the way it *thinks* things should be done, not the way they *are* done. Most organizations have some level of informal process in place to produce software. It may not be written down, but people know the general way that things are done. An easy first step in an improvement program is to document the current process and then look at where improvements are needed. Projects that want to look like they are doing the right thing often take a different approach. They give someone the task to go off in a corner and write the documentation without involving the people performing the work. When that happens, the documentation looks great. Unfortunately, no one follows it because they have no stake in what it says.

Resistance to change is to be expected in life and in process improvement. Some resistance is more obvious. When people resist the changes in their relationship, chairs fly across the stage at the *Springer*

show. In organizations, some projects are just as open in fighting change. Compared to hidden resistance, this kind of resistance is easier to handle because it is so obvious. On *Springer*, Steve and the security crew know to rush the stage and get between the combatants. In an organization, the sponsor and the process improvement group need to know where to step in and take action.

Sometimes, *Springer* reveals secret crushes where one guest longs for another, but fears to come out in the open. This can actually be a good situation for an organization. If a sponsor praises a project with proven, successful processes, other projects will want similar attention. They will secretly crave the sponsor's attention. Such feelings can be leveraged to bring improvements to those projects.

Improvement Groups and Appraisals

Steve and his security staff sit right at the edge of the *Springer* stage ready to jump in and get in the middle of any problems that arise. Process improvement groups serve the same role in an organization. When unexpected conflict or resistance appears, the process group is there to step in and work with all the involved parties to reach a solution. Sometimes the combatants on *Springer* do not want to stop, just like projects that always resist. Steve and his crew keep coming back until the guests behave. Process improvement groups and sponsors need that same level of commitment and persistence.

At the end of every show, Jerry sits off to the side and provides a little homily. He summarizes what the audience saw and puts it all into perspective as much as possible considering what is usually on the show. Lead appraisers fill that same role in improvement efforts. What they see in an organization may be as ugly as what Jerry deals with every day, but they are supposed to stay above it all and put the organization's behavior into perspective. That is, of course, unless the lead appraiser has been working as a paid consultant with the organization on its improvement efforts. That relationship can be a little *too* close, like some of the family members that show up on the *Springer* show. Such behavior from consultants may produce misleading or questionable appraisal results.

Summary

Through it all, Jerry and his security

staff see the problems of society pass in front of them every day. They see all manner of people from society's mainstream to its fringes. Now, this article is not intended to encourage process improvement groups to watch *The Jerry Springer Show* for guidance or insight, even though all of the behaviors listed here can probably be seen in a one-hour episode. Watching the show is its own form of dysfunctional behavior.

In an organization, a process improvement group is likely to get a *Springer*-esque view of behavior from dealing with all levels of the organization. Dysfunctional behavior can come from the sponsor, the middle managers, or even the practitioners. Whatever the source or nature of the behavior, it can cause a process improvement program to fail. Failed improvement programs can have a larger affect on the organization as a whole. The *Springer* show puts extreme dysfunctional behavior on the public stage where we can all see its effects. Improvement groups and appraisals can do the same for an organization by showing the dysfunctional process behavior to the sponsor and working to address it. ♦

About the Author



Paul Kimmerly has 17 years experience in software development for the different incarnations of the U.S. Marine Corps Technology Services Organization in Kansas City. A member of the Software Engineering Process Group (SEPG) since 1993, Kimmerly has served as the group's chair for the past nine years. Paul is an authorized Standard CMMI Assessment Method for Process Improvement Lead Appraiser. He presented at the 1997 and 2000 Software Engineering Symposiums and the 2004 National SEPG Conference. Kimmerly has contributed several articles on process improvement to CROSSTALK magazine.

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