TRUST ME

User pressure on developers may not mean they're short of time, but something much more important, says Graham Oakes.

Graham Oakes: demonstrate that you're listening to users

What does it mean when your customer says, "I want it all now"? Sometimes, of course, it just means that they're in a hurry. Often, however, I think they're saying something quite different.

Customers often apply pressure on developers to squeeze functionality into the next release, because they don't trust the development process. In their minds, stuff that's deferred to later releases will never happen.

In many places, this is a realistic attitude. In an environment where releases are constantly delayed and de-scoped, it's highly likely that functionality which is deferred will never actually arrive.

In this case, the only way for a customer to say that functionality is important is to push to have it immediately. So they say this even when the functionality really falls within the 'important but not urgent' quadrant.

This is bad for architecture. When people can't be explicit about what they really need, then we can't prioritise effectively. *In extremis*, we create bidding wars: competing groups escalate their demands until priorities are set purely on the basis of who shouts loudest.

Developers then struggle to negotiate for realistic schedules, and the resulting systems rarely contain the most important functionality. This in turn justifies the original lack of trust, perpetuating a negative spiral.

So when I hear teams say that they don't have time to develop a decent architecture, I start to check whether what they're really lacking is trust.

Trusted teams always seem to be able to find time to reflect on what they're doing, to re-factor, to undertake retrospectives, and so on. And by doing these things, they build a basis for further trust.

How do you build trust in the first place? A few quick thoughts:

● Saying "trust me" isn't enough. You need to actively manage trust. This may, for example, mean scheduling some simple yet non-essential functionality for early delivery, simply to demonstrate that you can indeed deliver.

● Time is of the essence. People are remarkably bad at connecting cause and effect when these are separated by more than a few weeks. It helps a lot if you can deliver in small, regular increments. (This is one reason people talk about the 'heartbeat' of a project – the regular rhythm of delivery that helps build trust.)

● People are much more willing to trust when they feel they've been listened to. So look for ways to demonstrate that you're listening to them.

What's fascinating is that time and trust are so intertwined. Teams that build trust with their customers can use this trust to gain time on their projects. And the best way to build trust is to act in a timely way.

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