

STRATEGY IS A MYTH

Much of software development strategy is story telling, says Graham Oakes. But is that so bad?



Graham Oakes: myths can be inspirational but also misleading

I was recapping the strategy underlying a successful development programme recently with a client, when I suddenly realised we were making it all up – life didn't happen that way at all.

It's not that we were lying. It's just that we were trying to tell a story that made sense of our chaotic experience. We were creating a myth.

The world is divided into two types of situations – those where you can clearly identify what is going on, and those where you can't.

In the first, you can observe the situation; identify root causes underlying the dynamics it exhibits; determine how to address those causes; and hence define and execute a strategy.

In the second, all you can do is experiment. You try stuff, see what that teaches you, iterate, and gradually develop a repertoire of effective interventions. Eventually a successful strategy emerges.

However, when you look back on that second situation, you understand the underlying dynamics a lot better than you did at the outset. You can recognise what the root causes were and why your interventions were effective. So you start to tell yourself a story, about how you laid out a strategy and executed it. You re-create your actions as if you'd lived in the first type of situation all along. You create a myth.

Myths are good. They help people make sense of the world. They are a powerful way to transfer knowledge. They can be inspirational.

But myths can also be misleading. They simplify out the chaos that is endemic to most projects, luring you to attempt to define strategy before you really understand what's going on.

At worst, you begin to lose heart when you can't come to a clear strategy at the outset of your initiatives. Yet often at the outset, your best strategy is simply to experiment a little and learn about the situation.

So what does this mean for software development and integration within organisations?

I think software development can be as chaotic as any other undertaking. You deal with complex technologies that interact in ill-defined ways; you then place these technologies into social contexts that contain diverse stakeholders with multiple, conflicting agendas.

For sure you need to develop clear strategies and plans for your initiatives – they provide a baseline to test progress against, if nothing else.

But you also need to be clear about the limitations of your understanding. You need to cultivate the attitudes necessary for operating in a chaotic world – a willingness to experiment, persistence in the face of setbacks, acceptance of failure as a precursor to learning.

Success doesn't always go to the team with the clearest strategy. It goes to the one that fails, learns – and keeps going.

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