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7 Habits of Highly Defective Practitioners

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I have uncovered 7 bad habits that lie at the root of all IT Management Failure! Well, if not all failures enough for the majority of the organizational problems I see. But you can break a bad habit and form a new one in just 21 days...

By [Hank Marquis](#)



If you work in IT Service Management long enough, you begin to see some patterns. Recently I worked with two very large multi-national/global organizations who both suffered from the same problem.

It reminded me of a popular self-help book that talked about habits and how to form and re-form them.

In one case, they had gone off on a “CobiT” hunt; and in another they were in the throws of an “ITIL hunt.” In both cases they had made a couple of classic mistakes that I have seen over and over again in the pursuit of IT Service Management excellence.

I’m not going to try and determine why these bad habits arise, but I do know how to recognize them.

Following, I describe the 7 habits of highly defective practitioners so that when you embark on a “hunt” you will be successful.

The Habits

The habits that lead to failed ITIL, CobiT, Six Sigma, Project Management, and pretty much all failures when trying to adopt or use any good practice are:

1. Inattentiveness to practice text
2. Not being attentive to stakeholders needs
3. Not having a coherent strategy for examples and wins
4. Not taking the “process” plunge
5. Not taking the clash between culture and process seriously
6. Holding up unattainable objectives as examples
7. Failing to report good news and improvements

Inattentiveness to practice text

Time and time again, practitioners read a summary of a practice and latch on the parts that interest them, and skip those that don't. For example, reading about ITIL, grasping on the idea of a CMDB and skipping all the details about the process required to care and feed for a CMDB. Any well formed practice (ITIL, CobiT, PMI, etc.) has lots of details gathered over years. As is often the case, the devil is in the details -- and this is precisely what most defective practitioners skip. Careful attention to precisely what the practice says -- not what you think it says, but what is written -- is required to break this habit.

Not being attentive to stakeholders needs

I have yet to read a practice that does not discuss the absolute criticality of stakeholders (you know, those pesky people for whom all we do actually matters.) ITIL has an entire book mostly dedicated to the subject. The very basis and purpose of CobiT is to force alignment with stakeholders. PMI counts it as one of the initial steps required for project success.

So how come virtually every place I go has no idea at all who their stakeholders are and what it will take to satisfy them? I cannot even begin to count the number of people I have talked to who cannot answer this simple question: "Which stakeholders want you to succeed at your implementation, and which want you to fail?" If you cannot answer this question then you are doomed to fail.

Not having a coherent strategy for examples and wins

"Build it and they will come" best exemplifies this habit. To reform this habit requires breaking the

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previous habits, and "beginning with the end in mind."

Those with this habit jump right into an implementation without any clear thought of how they are going execute over the long haul, and any good practice effort is a multi-year effort.

Not taking the "process" plunge

People are the key to success. Process is what people do, and thus critical to success. Notice that I didn't mention software? Fundamentally those afflicted by this habit possess one of two mindsets: 1) a piece of software will save them, or 2) they better do what I say or else.

One of the fundamental tenets of CobiT is process orientation. ITIL defines process. Yet time and time again I see companies betting the ranch on a new piece of software, and letting their people flounder without any formal, written, communicated, managed or measured process for how to work.

Not taking the clash between culture and process seriously

When managers to take the "process plunge," they often forget about people (the very reason for process.) Process changes how people work. People don't like to change how they work. But that's not the real problem here. The real problem is that 99% of all managers have no idea what their staff actually does. Oh they think they do, but they don't. They are removed from the realities of day-to-day working and don't know how different the real workflow (e.g., process) is from their pretty flowcharts.

Only engaging staff in the development of any process improvement, documentation or change effort will result in sustainable changes.

Holding up unattainable objectives as examples

Close to the top of bad habits is failure to lead, which occurs when one does not present realistic, attainable, measurable and agreed objectives. For example, a CIO telling IT that they are going to reduce headcount and budget by 10% each, while simultaneously delivering on a new application to a new business unit. Right. PMI (Project Management Institute, good practice in project management) uses the term progressive elaboration to describe how a series of small steps toward a defined goal actually get you to that goal.

To break this habit requires progressive elaboration, in conjunction with stakeholders (e.g., staff and others) to set realistic goals and time frames that take into account the maturity of the existing organization. You would not take pee-wee football players and put them into the playoffs; nor would you take a middle school team a university game. What makes a manager think their team is ready for the World Cup?

Failing to report good news and improvements

I learned the secret of success long ago ... "always share the glory, but always be seen sharing the glory." If you have a plan that is realistic, and you thought it through before you started, you will always have at least some good news to report, and you will know which stakeholders want to hear that good news. Those poor souls with this bad habit don't realize why we in psychology call "neural adaptation" -- it is why you don't feel the chair you're sitting on right now -- you are "used to it."

You as you forgot about your chair, stakeholders forget about how things used to be. We all know how it goes ... "what have you done for me today?" Benchmarking, measuring and reporting are fundamental to success. In fact, basically the entire reason for CobiT is just this -- to force you to set objectives, measure attainment, and take action if required.

21 Days

These 7 habits are just that -- habits. It is widely accepted that if you try, you can break a bad habit and form a new one in just about 21 days. In other words, if any of these things resonated with you, you are only 21 days away from a new and better habit!

It starts with understanding what you are doing now ("bad" habit) and consciously changing your behavior ("good" habit). Do this long enough and you will make a new habit -- and start to exhibit the *7 Habits of Highly Effective Practitioners*...but that is another story.

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