New Product Excellence

A Newsletter from J. H. Welsch Consulting, L.L.C.

Cleaning Out the Garage

What does your garage look like? I'm embarrassed to tell you that mine isn't what it should be. OK, it may not qualify for a TV reality show and it's NOT the one pictured above. However, considering that I've worked for a very long time for a company that makes storage products, I'm not terribly proud of it. You see, like many engineers, I'm something of a pack rat. Some things have sentimental value. Some were expensive or hard to come by and, even though I no longer need them, I can't bring myself to toss them. Others I MAY need somewhere down the road... As long as I have space to store this stuff, what's the harm?

But is hanging on to all that junk really harmless? The problem, of course, is that the junk that seems so harmless as long as I have the space to store it is really costing me both time and money. Could I sell some of that stuff and put the money to better use? If I got rid of it, could I put the space to better use? If I got rid of the stuff I don't need, could I more quickly find the stuff I do need?

It occurs to me that many companies have product lines that resemble my garage. If yours is among them, it may be time to consider some serious product line house cleaning. If you are to maintain acceptable delivery times and inventory turns while you introduce new products, you MUST have the discipline to kill the products that are no longer as important to you as they once were. That might mean killing the very product that put you in business but, hey, Ford no longer sells the Model A, do they? It might even mean killing a product that still brings in a fair bit of money, but if you can replace it with a product that brings in even more money, is that so bad?

Products that are past their prime tie up inventory dollars that could be used to support new products. They tie up production resources, thereby lengthening lead times. They even distract your sales force who should be focusing on products of the future, not hanging on to those of the past.

Paradoxically, your new product process has to include an old product process. It takes courage to do it but, just as proper pruning gives vitality to a tree or shrub, a carefully developed and executed product pruning process is vital to your overall product lifecycle management process. It's not nearly as exciting as developing new products but it's every bit as important.

Where are we going for dinner?

I don't know how it works in your family but here's how it works in mine...

The scenario is this: My wife and I are driving home in the late afternoon or early evening and the conversation goes something like...

Her: "I don't feel like cooking, let's stop somewhere to eat."
Me: "Sure, where shall we go? "
Her: "I don't care, you pick it."
Me: "No, your call. " (This one goes back and forth a few times, until...)
Me: "How about Italian?"
Her: "No, we had that on Tuesday."
Me: "OK, your turn; suggest something. "
Her: "I really don't care; your choice. "
Me: "OK, how about Mexican?"
Her: "No, too spicy."

Where are we going for dinner? (cont.)

And on and on and on it goes, right? Meanwhile what are we doing? We're still <u>driving</u>! We're wasting gas and chances are we're getting farther and farther from the place we'll finally select!

I'm embarrassed to admit it but I've been involved in product definition discussions that are much like that. A new product development project is initiated and the team members think they are in agreement about what the product should be. Development begins in earnest. After a fair bit of work is done, however, the team discovers that they are not all working with the same vision; what the engineers are designing is not what the marketing folks envisioned at all. Or maybe the marketers have had some new thoughts. Sometimes protracted discussions ensue but, in the meantime, the engineers are still working! Maybe they'll luck out and be moving in the right direction, but, giving due regard to Mr. Murphy, it's unlikely. If that occurs, not only will time and effort be wasted but engineers will be dispirited and the team may be irreparably damaged.

I've finally figured out that, when the dinner discussion begins to go in circles, the best thing to do is pull off the road until agreement is reached.

You need to do the same thing with your product development efforts; don't put the development efforts in gear until you have a shared, clear definition of your destination. That is, until the product parameters are clearly defined and all interested parties are in full agreement with them.

Admittedly, thoughts will evolve as a project progresses but if you can't come to a new, shared vision quickly, pull your project off the road and get people working on something else until you've agreed upon a new destination.

Our Offering

Assessment - "Prescription without diagnosis is malpractice." We will work with you to assess your strategy, culture, people and process and to create a plan to build on your strengths and mitigate your weaknesses.

Process Development - Based on core methodologies and an assessment of your realities, we will work with you to create a process that gives you an appropriate level of control while minimizing unproductive and dispiriting red tape. We also offer customizable templates and tools that greatly facilitate the process by reducing workload and improving communication.

Education and Training - Once a process has been developed, we can provide both education and training; the former to develop understanding of the principals and the latter to develop understanding of how the game is to be played. If needed, we can also do training in team dynamics to assure that your teams are working collaboratively .

Discovering Customer Needs - Asking customers what they want is necessary, of course, but it only scratches the surface. Understanding of customer needs involves intimacy between key developers and customers at all levels in the distribution chain. We can help you discover a methodology to delight your customers by solving problems of which they were not even aware.

Oversight - It is only in the heat of a real project that you will discover what works and what does not. We can work with you through a project, meeting periodically with members of both executive and project teams, to refine the process to your satisfaction.

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