Pandora and the Magic Vase

There are phrases we hear over and over while investigating software developments gone amuck. Some we hear in many developments resemble these: "Our productivity is 25 percent higher than we achieved on the last project because we are working smarter this time." Or, "The schedule is tight, but we have polished the requirements until they are rock solid." Or, "The software is 90 percent COTS. We should be able to deliver the product in six months." Or, "If we double the staff, we can cut the delivery time in half." Or finally, "We are 90 percent complete. Just a few more days of testing ..." You can probably add to this irrational bunch of statements your own experiences.

I am here to declare in true 1990s fashion that these absurdities are not our fault. No, I am not going to blame them on our parents, our schools, the environment where we grew to adulthood, or the occasional use of prescription drugs. These statements come from our genes, and there is nothing we can do to restrain ourselves from uttering them. Let me explain.

The source of this weakness has been with us since creation, at least according to tradition. Our story begins a long, long time ago in ancient Greece with two brothers: Prometheus and Epimetheus, who were among the titans prior to mankind being established on Earth. Prometheus was a young intelligent god whose personality and disposition would have made him an extreme sports star today. He was tasked by Zeus to create mankind. His brother, Epimetheus, was simpler (much more) than his older brother, and much less adventurous. All of his friends called him Epi the Lesser. Epimetheus was tasked to create the other creatures.

One day Prometheus tricked Zeus and stole divine fire from Mount Olympus for the benefit of mankind. Zeus, the chief god, was irate about the theft of this one thing that belonged only to the gods. He went ballistic and swore that Prometheus and all mortals would suffer for this affront. Zeus ordered Hephaestus to create Pandora from earth and water as vengeance upon man and his benefactor, Prometheus. The gods endowed the beautiful and seductive damsel (of course) with every charm including curiosity and deceit. Zeus reasoned that Prometheus was smart and would probably see through his plan, so he arranged for Pandora to marry Epi who, as I said before, was not the sharpest rock in the box. Zeus gave her a vase (no, it wasn't a box) as a wedding gift. Prometheus had warned his slow-

witted brother Epi about accepting gifts from Zeus, but Epi was dazzled by Pandora's beauty.

There are two versions of what transpired at this point. Version one says that Zeus forbade her to open the vase. Despite Prometheus' warnings, Epi allowed Pandora's womanly curiosity to win out and she opened the vase. Version two says that Pandora's task was to con Epi into opening the vase. Again, in spite of Prometheus' warnings, Pandora was so beautiful and, literally, irresistible, Epi could not refuse. After a brief casting of her wiles, Pandora led poor Epi into taking the lid off the vase.

When the lid was lifted (who did the deed is a religious issue), there was a tremendous whoosh and all but one of the evils, sorrows, and diseases were released to forever plague mankind. Evils like hard work, greed, lust, envy, television, Eminem, and Britney Spears escaped and spread over the entire earth.

Epimetheus may not have been too sharp, but he was fast. He managed to close the vase before the worst of all afflictions was released. Epi felt terrible about his mistake, but Zeus' work was not finished. After some discussion, Epi and Pandora concluded that the worst had been done and the vase was empty. Epi slowly lifted the lid, and there came a scream as hideous as anyone had ever heard, even on TV. The worst of all evils had finally been unleashed on the world. That evil was ... HOPE.

Because of hope we can never learn from our mistakes. History can never be our teacher. We will forever be cursed with unbounded optimism. Oddly, software program managers and developers seem to have been more receptive to this evil than any other mortal. What was it I heard yesterday? "If you adopt this (tool, technique, programming language, etc.), your productivity will improve an order of magnitude, and you will never again make an error!"

Sure it will!

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