The Five Stages of Denial

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It is probably safe to say that most contractors are not especially fond of software capability evaluations (SCEs). Anyone who performs SCEs eventually verifies this. It can easily result from watching a contractor go through the five stages of denial.

In lieu of providing a pedantic explanation of the denial process, the following fictional, if slightly exaggerated, telephone conversation is used to illustrate the five stages a contractor typically goes through while you attempt to schedule him or her for a SCE, and while the contractor attempts to convince you that, somehow or another, you really have dialed a wrong number…

Ring… Ring…
Contractor Point of Contact (CPOC): Hello?
SCE Team Leader (STL): Hello. This is [name] with the [government agency]. Did you receive our e-mail stating that we are intending to perform a SCE on your organization within the next six weeks?
CPOC: Yes. But I was a bit surprised by it.
STL prepares for Denial No. 1.
STL: Why were you surprised?
CPOC: We do not do software development in our organization.
Denial No. 1 confirmed.
STL: Hmmm. Curious. We were under the impression that you are doing software development, so maybe there is a mistake some place. Would you please tell me, at a very high level, how you view the type of work you are doing for us?
CPOC: Well, mostly we design database schemas, develop and debug Structured Queries Language queries, build interactive Web sites using Java, JavaScript, and CGL, integrate all that with most of the leading commercial-off-the-shelf database tools, and, of course, we do exhaustive testing and code modification.
STL: I see. And you do not consider any of this to be software development?
CPOC: Nope. No software development. None at all. Not even the littlest bit.
STL: And the other projects in your organization? Are they doing software development?
CPOC: Definitely not! The other projects are building virtual classrooms. These are completely interactive, totally customizable, entirely user-sensitive neutral network systems driven by state-of-the-art knowledge bases and enhanced by genetic algorithms.
STL: But you do not consider this to be software development?
CPOC: Oh no, absolutely not!
STL: Well, as I am sure you are aware, our contract with you requires you to be a Level 3 software development organization. You are about 30 seconds from convincing me that you do not do any software development and, hence, are clearly not a software development organization. Is this what you are saying?
CPOC: Arrrraaaggghhhh!
STL: I'm sorry, what was that?
CPOC: Acckkkkkkkkkkk!

STL: Do you need to get a glass of water or something? I'll hold…
CPOC: (cough, cough) Aaaghh. Actually, I guess you could say that some of our work is software development.
Contractor successfully moves beyond Denial No. 1.
STL: Very well. What is the best date for us to perform this SCE?
CPOC: Actually, a SCE really isn't necessary.
STL prepares for Denial No. 2.
STL: Would you please elaborate?
CPOC: Sure. Even though we do software development, we are subject to highly unusual circumstances and, hence, we deserve a waiver.
Denial No. 2 confirmed.
STL: I see. What are these circumstances?
CPOC: Our work is unique. No one on the planet does anything like what we do. The software Capability Maturity Model really does not apply to us.
STL: We typically find that all projects are unique.
CPOC: But we are very, very, very unique!
STL: You certainly sound unique. This is good, because we are quite used to evaluating unique projects. So, this really won't be a problem. Unless, of course, you are so unique that you have found a way to reliably develop complex software systems without using project plans, without managing requirements or configurations, without ensuring quality, and without tracking actual progress.
CPOC: From that perspective I suppose that just maybe we are not all that unique.
Contractor successfully moves beyond Denial No. 2.
STL: Very well. So when can we schedule the SCE?
CPOC: There is another little problem we have to discuss first.
STL prepares for Denial No. 3.
STL: Yes?
CPOC: It is going to cost us a lot of money to prepare for the SCE and I'm wondering if I can just send the invoice directly to you. It should be for somewhat less than a million dollars, I think. I will have to work the numbers a bit to know for sure.
Denial No. 3 confirmed.
STL: We always advise that you do not take any special steps to prepare for the SCE. Generally, we are only interested in looking at documentation and evidence that already exists, and asking people about what they are currently doing. Very little

preparation is necessary. Unless, of course, you are telling me that you have a lot of documentation to create.

CPOC: Oh no! I'm not saying that.

STL: Is it the evidence then? Is that what you need to create?

CPOC: No, no, of course not!

STL: That is good to hear. How about if we do everything we can to minimize your costs associated with this SCE, and you do the same?

CPOC: I guess that will probably work.

Contractor successfully moves beyond Denial No. 3.

STL: So when can we schedule the SCE?

CPOC: That depends.

STL prepares for Denial No. 4.

STL: On what?

CPOC: The SCE is going to completely disrupt all our management and project personnel, so we will need to slip our critical milestones, deadlines, and delivery dates.

Denial No. 4 confirmed.

STL: By how much?

CPOC: I'm just kind of estimating, but I think two years ought to do it.

STL: But the entire on-site period only lasts a week.

CPOC: I know. But no one has a moment of spare time. Everyone is already working massive overtime. They work 167 hours per week, then take an hour for lunch. Junior people skip their lunch and try for an hour's sleep. The schedule is really quite tight.

STL: And this is how you planned it?

CPOC: Well, no, we did not plan for it to be this way.

STL: The project is not occurring according to plan? Is this because the project is subject to some type of massive unrecoverable problem that you would like to tell me about?

CPOC: Oh, no! No problem at all. It's just, uh, we've got a lot of really enthusiastic project personnel who love their work. Yes, that is it! Teamwork! High morale! They cannot stand to leave their cubicles!

STL: But you think that they will be able to find 45 minutes where they can come to an interview?

CPOC: Probably. I guess. But it is really hard to pry them away from software development. I mean nonsoftware development. I mean software nondevelopment. Anyway, did I mention how high morale is?

Contractor successfully moves beyond Denial No. 4. Barely.

STL: Yes, you did. Do you have any preferences as to when we can schedule the SCE?

CPOC: Sure, let me check the calendar.

STL prepares for Denial No. 5.

STL: How does the calendar look?

CPOC: You are not going to believe this.

STL: Trust me, we have heard it all before.

CPOC: Well, it looks like the earliest possible window where we can do this is the month immediately after my retirement.

STL: And that will be?

CPOC: Hard to say. I'm only 22.

Denial No. 5 confirmed. ◆

About the Author

Dr. Richard Bechtold is president of Abridge Technology and an independent consultant who supports industry and government in the analysis, design, development, and deployment of improved software management, engineering, acquisition, and risk-reduction processes. He has more than two decades of experience in the software industry and holds a doctorate degree from George Mason University, where he also is an adjunct professor teaching software project management and process improvement. He has written more than two dozen works relating to software project management, software process improvement, risk management, and related topics. His latest book, *Essentials of Software Project Management,* was published this summer. (Management Concepts Inc.)

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