



CROSSTALK

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Who Knows Best?

In this fast paced software industry the latest panacea for sale is called "best practices." To jump-start an organization's performance it seems like a very logical strategy. Find out who does what best in the industry and emulate them.

"Hey Wally, I've got a great idea. Let's get Eddie Haskle to teach us how to build a pinewood derby car. He told me he won last year so you know he can build a winner."

"I don't know Beav, can we trust Eddie?"

"Sure Wally, I can see the trophy now. Dad's going to be proud!"

Sounds simple — and that is where the danger lies. No matter what it is, we want it now, and we don't want to get off the couch to get it. We have created a lethargic consumerism that's transitioned from the corner store, to the drive-up window, to home delivery. Books, clothes, food, tickets, and even cars can be purchased on the Internet and delivered to your doorstep the next day — but at what price?

Best practices smack of that same quick and easy mentality. Adopting a best practice is not an easy process and should not be our only improvement strategy. In the steeplechase for best practices there are four questions, or hurdles, that will require research, thought, and effort.

"Wally, this will be the fastest car in the Rain Gutter Regatta."

"Regatta? Beave, you dough head, the regatta is a boat race not a car race!"

The first hurdle: what best practice do we need? This isn't the fashion industry; just because someone calls it a best practice does not mean we need it. Go to the best practices market with an idea of what is going to help.

"Gee Wally, we did everything Eddie said and we came in dead last."

"I'm not sure Eddie was telling the truth about winning last year. Everyone at the derby said Stubby Wallace won three years in a row."

The second hurdle: how do we know which practice is best? Before hooking up with the Eddie Haskles of the software market, do your research. Robert Glass in the April 1999 issue of *Communications of the ACM* investigated one of the most productive practices in the industry — inspections. Most journals, magazines, and trade shows indicate best inspection practices are founded in formal inspections — assigned roles, pre-inspection training, several reviewers, and formal meetings. Glass found that informal inspections were more effective, and two to three participants were sufficient. He warns of "... a peculiar dichotomy our field has — we laud with our hearts, not with our heads."

"It looked so easy when Eddie was showing us how to sand pinewood, but now we are back home, I can't sand my car evenly."

"Yeah, maybe Dad could get a neat workshop like Mr. Haskle's."

The third hurdle: how do we know a best practice will work for our organization? If Ada worked for Booch does that mean it will work for you? This may be the toughest hurdle of all — the one with the water behind it. Consider available resources, scalability, and your organization's culture when adopting a best practice. Discounting any one of these factors leads to disaster.

"Boys, I don't mind you going to Eddie or Stumpy for ideas but the only way you are going to beat them is to come up with a better idea of your own. That, mixed with hard work, will serve you well."

The fourth and final hurdle: are your practices better than the best? If we chase each other's best practices, eventually innovation will die.

Our employees live and breathe the business daily and are a valuable source of creativity, ingenuity, and practicality. Cultivate their ideas.

Unlike fast, faster, and fastest — best has no connection in origin with good. You have to make that connection.

— Gary Petersen, TRI-COR Industries

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