

Time, Resources, and Authority

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(Originally published in Software Maintenance News, May 1991, Vol. 9, No. 5, page 12)

[Currently I am a GS-14 2210 (Senior IT Specialist) but at the time this article was published I was a freelance consultant in software maintenance and development. I only possessed a Bachelor of Science in Business Communication and Computer Science from Wright State University; today I have a Master's Degree from George Mason University in Public Policy: Transportation, Operations, and Logistics with graduate studies in Information Management Science. My resume, in 1991, consisted of Computer Science Corporation, The North Carolina Department of Community Colleges, ASA Microsystems, and other organizations. My resume has grown since then- please visit my business card.]

The struggle

In the many person/years I have put into maintaining code for existing systems, I have seen the struggle in getting time, resources, and authority. These three things are vital if a maintenance department is to keep itself perpetuated and the existing system profitable. I have been involved in the dilemma of knowing what to do to maintain the code, knowing how to enhance the code, and knowing what tools I could use to make it all work smoother. But what I did not know was how to get what I needed from management.

To learn the answers, I set about asking department managers and project managers how they solved this dilemma. They agreed that management consistently looked at their departments for tangible, observable, and measurable things they have done to warrant the time, resources, and authority that they requested.

They all had two stages in which to provide management with concrete details. First stage was to make the system maintenance department itself more tangible and observable. The second stage was to report all the measurable items.

The following tips are what these software professionals employed to change the situation when they found themselves lacking time, resources, and authority. They knew these lacks to be symptoms of a greater cause and agreed that the cause was management's lack of knowledge of what they did to maintain existing systems all year through. These tips were remedies they had tried and found effective.

Before budget time and all year through

The first sets of ideas are things to do before budget time and all year through.

Report what you are doing to maintain the systems on a regular basis to management. Do not rely on management to ask you to fill out a planning form; keep management literally

flooded with updates, both good and bad. Be technical, and, if they have to ask, then you know you have their attention. Keep your reports consistent and mention your accomplishments congruent to the accomplished task; never heap undue laurels. In each report take a sentence or two to repeat your strengths as well as your weaknesses in maintaining systems. This keeps future surprises to a minimum.

Another tip dealt with the lack of image associated with maintaining software systems. Gain some exposure for the maintenance department. One professional set up a user forum that met on a timely basis and allowed users to yell at the programmers if they felt frustrated. The programmers got a much clearer idea of what their objectives were and the users got to know how patient and, at times, similarly frustrated the programmers were.

Publishing a small newsletter for the users, containing minutes from the above form meetings, questionnaires, and new and old information about their systems reinforced the maintenance department's image. Be sure to point out that it was published by the maintenance organization or you may not get credit.

One more tip to improve image was to encourage programmers to join outside related organizations and write papers and articles. Take a published work and report it in the newsletter, proudly displaying that it was published elsewhere. This may give the department enormous respectability from below, above, and laterally.

They may know you are there, but have no idea what you are capable of. Some professionals have developed a capability statement and published it on a quarterly basis. A capability statement lists what you have done and how it benefited the organization. List strengths that have not been used and strengths where the department's skills have met a key need. Mention maintenance turnaround time, and suggest ways it could be made shorter.

At budget time

The above suggestions have all served to make maintaining systems more tangible and observable. Management likes that sort of thing. Applying these tips will ease symptoms of lacking time, resources, and authority, but it is not the whole cure.

At budget time, make the details concrete. This is where all the measurable details come in to play. Paint pictures. The use of charts is one of the most persuasive devices one can employ.

What goes on the charts? Where do you get the figures?

The histogram, or bar chart, seemed to be the chart of choice for professionals I interviewed. A figure from the past, an actual figure for this year, and a projected figure for next year... Some managers like two columns for the current year, showing actual expenditures against what was budgeted.

Record keeping is one of the hardest chores a project manager has to do, but it is the chore with the most rewards. Starting without any figures from the past or present requires research. For salary requests, the human resources department may be able to find figures relating to projects and staff members like yours. Since it is the human resources department's assignment to report such information on a timely basis, some professionals were able to extrapolate the information they need from those reports. Somewhere, in every organization, there is a person whose job description calls for them to collect figures for consultants, hardware, software, resource manuals, office overhead, and the like.

The figures for the next budget year are derived from spending of the past and present. Normally these figures are upscaled from the present, but in some cases downscaling is appropriate. Downscaling can occur in the budget when certain stages of a project are nearing completion, or when responsibilities are shifted. Upscaling the budget can be justified by writing and maintaining a capability statement as mentioned earlier. Focus on weaknesses that need to be resolved and state what is needed to strengthen those weaknesses. These steps need to be documented, costed, and timed, and statements written so that management has a measurable goal.

Ask

These tips can help ease some symptoms of lacking time, resources, and authority, but they are not the whole cure. In sales training, they tell you: *Ask for the sale*. After making your capabilities known, after showing the service you propose to deliver—do not forget to ask for the time, resources, and authority you need.