Lessons Not Learned at University #12

Curriculum vitae

The Consultant was nearing the end of three long four-month missions for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation in Burma (Myanmar). The National Forest Inventory was completed and processing the data was nearly complete. The Forest Department wanted to determine the next major project for their computer section.

There was a meeting of the senior staff of both the Forest Department and the Timber Corporation and *The Consultant* was asked to take them through the steps to determine what they should do next. *The Consultant* had his ideas, but knew that his ideas were not necessarily the same as theirs so he was careful to lead, not direct, the discussions.

The first problem was that the two Directors General could hold such a meeting but Ministerial approval had not first been obtained to allow *The Consultant* to contribute. This was simply resolved by holding the meeting in the large room adjacent to *The Consultant's* office so that they could waffle for 2 minutes, agree that they needed help, and lo and behold, they found that help was at hand on their very doorstep!

So for about an hour *The Consultant* led them through the steps they needed to consider. The meeting broke into discussion groups and it was interesting trying to read the body language. The discussions commenced with arguments and much shaking of heads and waving of arms. However slowly agreement within the groups seemed to emerge. Then the groups got together and after more discussion there was general consensus. The two Directors General brought the meeting back to order.

The Senior Programmer presented his summary of the situation, fortunately in English. He said that there was general agreement as to what they believed was the most appropriate system to be developed next, a system that was vital to the future of both the Forest Department and the Timber Corporation. He concluded by saying "we all agree that the most appropriate system to be implemented next is the Elephant's Curriculum Vitae".

The Consultant, now standing in front of 30 senior staff, was nonplussed to put it mildly. His brain raced like it never had before. The muscles at the side of the mouth were directed not to laugh on pain of death. A straight face had to be kept, whatever the cost.

It slowly dawned that they were perfectly correct! The Elephant's CV was the most important system. Not a staff personnel system but a personnel system for elephants! Where does the elephant work best? Who were their parents? How experienced are they? Which elephants have mated with which? What is their medical history? Which oozie[1] worked with which elephant? Which elephants could not work with other particular elephants? How did the elephant behave when it comes into musth[2]? What was their age class distribution? And so the questions that both departments needed to address about the elephants continued. In Burmese forestry, humans were not quite as important as elephants.

The Consultant knew for sure that he would not have picked this system requirement in a million years, but it had only taken only a split second to realise that the Burmese had got it right.

Lesson: A consultant doesn't need to know what is needed, so long as he can help the people who matter determine how to fulfil their needs, once they are clear about what these really are.

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[1] An oozie (or more commonly Mahout in India) is the person who works the elephant. The pairing commonly lasts for the careers of both.

[2] Musth occurs when bull elephant's hormone levels rise and the elephant becomes very aggressive.