



I'm Level 5! (Technically)

A formal CMM appraisal isn't the freewheeling laughfest you might expect it to be. For the process team, it's like having Internal Revenue Service auditors camp in your kitchen for a couple of weeks to analyze six-year-old gas receipts and discarded Q-Tips, and to interview everyone including the neighbor's cat to see if every detail of your life is really what you say it is. Yet in the waning days of our recent appraisal, our software engineering process group leader wore a perma-grin that made me wonder if the strain had made him blow a gasket.

Then we heard the appraisal results: Level 5! Management is ecstatic, but they're also quick to emphasize that they've pushed CMM-based improvements all these years to achieve business objectives—not for the chance to gloat. With this in mind, let me emphasize that just because the nine-member appraisal team was led by the author of the CMM himself (Mark Paulk), and included reputedly the toughest CMM appraiser around (Donna Dunaway), and just because they all agreed that all the teams and product lines from our entire 500+ software producers utilize Level 5 processes, that doesn't mean your processes aren't just as good or better than ours, although there's a 99 percent chance you'd be wrong. Neener neener neener.

So in this spirit of humility, I'll share my firsthand insight of what it takes to be a CMM Level 5 organization. First, there's preparation. To be fair, my preparation for this last appraisal was limited, but if I'd been interviewed, I would have been prepared: "That whaduyacallit—CMM thing—is for software, and I don't help produce any," I'd have said.

So if you want to split hairs, I suppose you could say that the Level 5 appraisal applies slightly more to everyone else in our division than to *CROSSTALK*. But we're right there on the same organizational chart, clear as day. And that means I have insight from working in the same organizational *culture* as the developers. Not that I'm saying I know any of the *specific* processes our developers use—give me a break; most of our developers work in another building, and the closest ones in this building are at the end of a particle accelerator-length hallway that probably ends in another time zone—but I sometimes use the same vending machines they use, and I'm on a few of the same E-mail lists, most of which have to do with somebody-I-don't-know's retirement luncheon or whatever. And shouldn't anybody who knew these people well enough that they'd pay eight bucks and blow three hours in a restaurant waiting for one waitress to process everybody's credit cards already know about so-and-so's luncheon?

But that is not the point. Actually, I forgot what my point was. But this I know: I no longer put process improvement in the same category as "recreational bug tasting" or "accompanying my wife to the fabric store." As much as it amazes me to say it, I'm a process convert.

First, some background. My old attitudes came from work in the publishing field, which has a lot in common with software development. Both fields require extensive coordination and tracking, plus both involve mostly desks and computers and meetings—I mean, they're practically identical.

Anyway, my previous employers all relied on heroics to get the job done, and I liked being Mr. Heroic Stud Hombre. So when they sat us down here to get our processes in order, I thought they had no business documenting what (in my experience) was 100 percent unrepeatable. But we pushed ahead and laid out our roles and responsibilities, documented a process we could all live with, created metrics that actually told us things, and we've been tweaking the process ever since. And now that I've had a taste of both approaches, I'll take a good process over being Zorro the Firefighter and Bomb Defuser. Why waste my creative energies solving problems that a good process would take care of automatically?

So I guess the local process improvement culture did waft down the particle accelerator tunnel into this office. And in case you were wondering, working for a Level 5 organization is still a lot like working for any other organization, if you don't count the luminescent glow emanating from the building and the engineers' faces—or at least the faces of us converts.

— Lorin May

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