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Moving Mountains—or at Least a Few Boulders

BY BUD BILANICH

THIS IS MY LAST COLUMN FOR 2008. SINCE THIS COLUMN IS CALLED Common Sense, I'd like to share a story about the power of this type of thinking. It could be an urban myth, but I have seen it in several places and I like its common sense message, so I am going to tell it here.

Saint Petersburg, Russia was built in the early 18th century. The people in charge of building Saint Petersburg had a boulder problem. Centuries before, glaciers had deposited several large boulders on the site of the new city.

There was one particularly large boulder that was a huge problem. It was gigantic and right in the middle of one of the planned main thoroughfares of the city. Try as they might, the people in charge of building the city couldn't move it.

Word got around about this problem. A peasant showed up and offered to remove the boulder. He got the job. The people in charge figured they would let him try to move the boulder as they couldn't figure out how to do so.

The next day, he showed up with a crowd of workers, all carrying shovels. They dug a huge hole next to the boulder, propping up the boulder with timbers as they worked. When the hole was large enough, they removed the timbers and the boulder dropped into the hole. They covered the boulder with dirt, and carted away the extra soil.

I like this story because it demonstrates how simple, common sense solutions to complex problems are often overlooked. The planners and engineers were caught in the paradigm of moving the boulder, but it

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was too heavy and too well entrenched in the ground.

Instead of trying to move the boulder, the peasant let the boulder move itself. He allowed gravity to work for him. He saw the problem from a different perspective and solved it.

The Simplest Solution...

Have you ever heard of Occam's Razor? It is a principle that suggests “All things being equal, the simplest solution is the best.” Or, when multiple competing theories or suggestions are equal, select the one that introduces the fewest assumptions.

The peasant in the story was able to solve the boulder problem by applying this logic. In so doing, he used his common sense to redefine and solve the problem. It's been my experience that the common sense solution to most problems usually is the simplest

solution. That's why I am such a strong proponent of common sense.

I don't want to get too heady here, especially when I'm focusing on something as simple and straightforward as common sense. However, an historical perspective on common sense might be useful. Aristotle suggested that common sense is the meeting of the five senses. John Locke, the English philosopher, agreed. He suggested that as human beings, we receive input from each of our senses, and then integrate this input into a single impression, “the sense of things in common across disparate impressions,” hence the term “common sense.”

Next year when you are trying to solve a particularly vexing product management problem, remember the story of the peasant and the boulder. Use your common sense, find the simplest solution, and you'll do well. ○



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