

Memoirs of a Self-Loathing IT Professional

By Bernie Wieser

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Play Nice

Not everything was dire at Banana Energy Corporation during the downturn. Though many managers started to select big vendor, one-stop-shop, silver-bullet solutions supporting the *Buy over Build* directive, a few internal development projects started where there were no vendor solutions available. I didn't understand the big system thinking because big systems have big price tags, and spending more to tighten the belt just seemed crazy – especially when you need specialized human resources to implement them and keep them running. The in-house projects made a lot of sense because they would unify critical business process across the business units, and replace siloed applications with a single, consistent solution. It can be hard to argue against consistency.

Anne had a couple of the development projects come her way. She was very eager to accept work from clients, even when she didn't have resources to deliver. She picked me to be the technical lead for one of them: the Land Management System. Energy companies need to have large groups of people to administer issues and contracts above and below ground. I quickly learned above ground is called *surface land* and below ground is called *mineral or subsurface* land. Surface land primarily deals with land owners and subsurface deals with the government for mineral rights.

Anne told me I could pick my team for the project - if it consisted of Jeff, Todd, and Kenneth. I was also offered a developer from a different group named Mike Dixon. Anne

explained that Mike would be on loan because the other IT manager wanted to keep him around but didn't have any immediate work for him. I agreed to the team, though I really didn't have a choice in the matter at all. I voiced my objection over Kenneth because *he didn't take direction well*. Anne assured me that Kenneth would do whatever I asked, and if he didn't, she would do something about it. I thought I could manage Kenneth because of Anne's assurance. She also told me she had great faith in my ability to *herd the cats*.

I wanted to have a less formal but strong comradery amongst the development team so, given the lack of coffee machines, I invited everyone to an informal team builder at the Third Cup coffee shop on the ground floor of our building.

"I don't do coffee, it's a waste of money," Kenneth told me. So he opted out.

When I approached Mike, he asked, "Is this a required meeting because I'm really busy?"

I hadn't interacted with Mike before. He wasn't located on our floor. Given that Anne told me he was on loan due to a lack of work, I was surprised by his response but I didn't challenge him on it. I wanted the guys to *want* to communicate, and I didn't want to foster communication with a big stick. So the meeting ended up being just the usual crowd: me and the dudes. I had my large latte (that I referred to as my \$5 caffeine tax), Jeff had his usual black-medium-medium, and Todd had his ritual Rooibos tea.

"So we have this new Land Management project," I started and explained a few of the project details. "We have to build this big thing to consistently manage Banana's owned and operated assets across the organization."

"Well Banana doesn't really own the asset," Todd said. "They get licenses and permits to extract the product and pipe it to refineries. *We the people* own the product, and it's the greatest theft of public property in the country."

"Banana pays the license fees and royalties and powers our economy, so don't be a communist," Jeff said somewhat concerned. I was beginning to see that Todd was left and Jeff was right on the sociopolitical scale.

“Well we have a good resume building project and in the absence of best software development practices, I’d like to document how we’re going to build it right the first time,” I said, putting the conversation back on track.

“What about the new project management and enterprise architecture groups?” Jeff asked with an evil grin.

“Anne told me we just need to carbon-copy Alan and Paul on everything we do, especially our process documentation,” I replied. “They don’t have any guidance to give us – yet.”

Todd swirled his teabag in his cup. “So these guys are supposed to be giving us the processes and procedures, but they don’t have them yet so we just pass ours on for their approval?”

“Yes, as long as they don’t block the project I’m happy,” I said. I was worried Paul would say no to anything I sent his way.

“Be prepared for our process to become their process,” Todd stated. “They might even leave our names on documents,” he said wryly.

“Hey, did you get a pay raise for your promotion?” Jeff asked.

“No, still out 10%,” I replied. “I have more responsibility and challenge but the same rate.”

“Cool,” said Jeff, “so now it’s more like a 20% pay cut.” He chuckled a bit.

“I guess,” I replied. “I try not to get too upset when I remember Aubrey Wilson’s 15 million dollar combined compensation package from last year. I read the annual report.”

“Well, you can’t pay me enough to work with Kenneth,” Todd stated. Todd had a growing, visible dislike of Kenneth. They had several run-ins in our status meetings with Anne. It was easy enough to read Todd’s body language as soon as Kenneth opened his mouth in Todd’s presence. Todd would cross his arms and stare at the floor with a frown. Kenneth didn’t

seem to pick up on these not-so-subtle visual cues. When Kenneth said something obviously wrong, Todd would undiplomatically correct him. They would bicker about who was right until Anne told them to take it offline.

I attempted to lay down the law in our first, official project meeting. “We’re going to do this by the book,” I said and the book I chose was called *Managing the Software Process*. We set forth all our rules of engagement, artifacts to be generated, and meetings to be held. Everyone knew their role and what part of the system they’d be accountable for. We also agreed to interim testing and quality reviews. I was confident it was going to work. Everyone signed their name to the process document so I believed I had the buy-in from the team. What I didn’t count on was the random elements of personal behavior and professionalism.

The project started well enough. I managed to gather the requirements and work with the team to create a preliminary design. I broke the application down into systems, and everyone was assigned their piece. The challenge didn’t really start until the implementation was underway. I had to pester Mike to get him to make his weekly goals. His excuse was that he was always too busy and would get on it. Kenneth started well but started going rogue as the implementation became more complex. He had a bad habit of tweaking other developer’s code without first talking to them about it. Todd was really frustrated by this as he was meticulous in his work. Every line of Todd’s code had discipline and elegance. He started bringing up ownership and change management repeatedly in meetings, and I kept supporting him by reminding everyone to stick to the process we agreed to.

Todd was also frustrated by Kenneth’s attitude towards testing. “The test is the contract,” Todd would say. “When the test passes, the code is golden and we move on.” Kenneth ignored this advice and didn’t write tests. After a while Todd’s tests started failing. At this point Todd came to me exasperated and I called a meeting to deal with the issue of change control. After my monologue on how we were to play nicely together through applied change management, Todd brought up his grievance.

“I would like to mention that my part, the transaction subsystem, was working when I checked it in two weeks ago – but when I got the notice that the data validation tests were failing I updated my repository only to find out that Kenneth had gone in and rewritten parts of my code, and it is those changes that are failing. Mark, would you please ask Kenneth why he would be in the transaction code when his current task is reporting and printing?”

Kenneth piped up before I could be diplomatic.

“In an Agile project every developer can modify the code base,” Kenneth said.

“We didn’t agree on an Agile methodology for this project, Kenneth,” Todd said emphatically. “Why are you touching my code?”

“Don’t be such a baby. Agile is the best way we can do this project,” Kenneth replied.

“Baby?! It took me a month to write that code and you arbitrarily go and change it? Even if we were following Agile, which we are *not*, you should have run the test cases to prove your changes didn’t break the functionality! Agile is test driven development! You didn’t run the tests, and you didn’t bother to go back and fix the god damn code.”

“Agile is iterative and adaptive through cross functional teams,” Kenneth said even louder. “Your code was breaking my build so I fixed it.”

Mike quietly asked, “Are you quoting the Agile manifesto? That doesn’t mean what you think it means.”

Todd was fuming and yelled, “You bloody well rewrote it!”

“I had to fix my build and *your* code was broken. Maybe you just don’t understand what I did,” Kenneth snarled.

“It wasn’t broken! It’s broken because you didn’t do a full update from version control, Kenneth,” Todd fired back. “The code went through a full build and test. All you had to do was *refresh-all* and run the tests.”

“I shouldn’t have to waste my time on that,” Kenneth said even louder.

“Oh my god you are such an asshole!” Todd exclaimed. “Just because you talk louder and more often than anyone else doesn’t mean that you are right!”

“What do you even know about programming? My dog is a better programmer than you,” Kenneth shouted.

It was at that point that Todd stood up, grabbed his chair, and threw it across the table in Kenneth’s direction. Kenneth jumped up, but the chair slid by him, off the table, and into the wall taking out a fine chunk of alabaster.

“Gentleman, gentleman, please!” Jeff implored, also now on his feet and motioning for calm with his hands.

“Wow,” Mike said, sitting up straight with a shocked, wide-eyed look on his face. “I did not see that coming.”

“Okay, just sit down,” I said with extreme authority and finger pointing. Everyone sat and just looked down into the table as if they wanted to crawl underneath it. I waited a few moments half expecting security to come through the door and throw us all out. When it felt safe I said, “I think we’ve done enough damage for one day. Meeting is done; Todd please stay here.” Kenneth was the first out. I worried he would run straight to Anne’s office. Jeff was the last one out, and he closed the door behind him.

“We just did twenty thousand dollars of damage to the ivory tower,” I said looking at Todd. “Usually you are so sedate.”

Todd got up and went to the wall to examine it. “Sorry, that guy just pisses me off. He’s been screwing with the code-base for weeks. It’s like he’s intentionally sabotaging the project.”

“Is everything else okay? I mean, that was pretty extreme Todd, and so not okay,” I said.

“Yes, everything is fine. I just can’t deal with the guy. He makes stress,” Todd said shaking his head.

“I’ll talk to Anne and see what I can do to get him reassigned,” I offered.

“Thanks, if I don’t get fired for the wall. I’ll pay for the repairs,” Todd said in a quiet voice.

“Don’t worry about that,” I said. “If Kenneth doesn’t run to tell Anne, I’ll just call maintenance and tell them we had an accident.”

“Don’t lie on my behalf,” Todd said bluntly.

“I’m not lying. I’m sure you didn’t mean to miss,” I jested as I gestured towards the door.

Todd laughed. “Thanks,” he said as he shuffled out.

To my relief Kenneth did not run to Anne. No one talked about it, and I figured everyone was too embarrassed. When I called building maintenance to apologetically report the damaged wall, the man on the other end of the phone said, “Yeah, don’t worry about it. It’s a cost of doing business.” He didn’t want to know how it happened and I got the impression he didn’t really care.

I met with Anne a couple days later and suggested there would be a mutiny if Kenneth didn’t move on to something more challenging. I explained that Kenneth was making more work for us, jeopardizing the timeline, and demoralizing the team. Anne was surprisingly sympathetic. “I just happen to have a smaller project he can work on,” she said, “Thank you Mark for being diplomatic.”

Kenneth was happy to be moved off the project. In our last status meeting with him *he* was the one to raise his departure and he made it sound like a promotion. Anne had given him something only *he* could do, which sounded a lot like him telling us that we were all idiots. Mike started coming to the coffee meetings as if somehow our shared experience had strengthened our bond. We managed to finish the land management system six weeks ahead of schedule. At our impromptu launch party, Jeff (who as a basketball enthusiast) made a toast that brought some perspective to the whole project: “It takes ten hands to score a basket, but only

two to throw a chair. Here is to the throw that made our success possible.” Kenneth was invited, but he opted out.