



## Train Ride Reading December 2009

# The Emotional IT Manifesto

### Principles of IT-specific leadership

The Train Ride Reading series covers a fairly broad range of management and leadership topics – but there is an emphasis on issues around IT leadership. This is not just a consequence of the author's professional background but also a deliberate effort to fill a gap in available management writing.

In this context, the final 2009 edition presents a concise a summary of what it takes for a manager to lead IT professionals, and what it takes for an organisation to develop and access the full potential of its IT area.

The article is entitled “manifesto” for a reason: For once, this is not a cold, surgical analysis (although it is based on one) but rather a call for action. Let's stop wasting IT talent. Let's bridge the culture gap that isolates IT. And let's re-introduce old-fashioned management principles such as mutual trust, respect, and common sense.

Why “Emotional IT”? The most pervasive and pernicious misconception is that IT is a completely rational and logical discipline, and that IT specialists are therefore completely rational and logical people. Neither is true, and the true power of transforming IT leadership comes from embracing the emotional side of IT.

So - here is the Emotional IT Manifesto, loosely divided into three parts:

- 1. We respect IT work as a creative process.**  
Writing or composing are fitting analogies. Bricklaying is not. Being able to reconcile unpredictable creativity with organisational planning is a hallmark of successful IT managers.
- 2. We accept that IT knowledge is counter-hierarchical.**  
The medieval notion that the master always knows more than the apprentice does not fit a discipline that is hooked into an ongoing innovation race and that is split into numerous specialist niches.
- 3. We are aware that IT specialists can wield enormous power.**  
Senior IT specialists can get round almost any access controls for sensitive data, and they are able to bring an organisation to its knees with a few keystrokes.
- 4. Therefore, we build IT leadership primarily on mutual trust and respect.**  
Checks and controls have their place but become counter-productive when veering towards paranoia and nannying.
- 5. Responsibility and ownership are inseparable.**  
Ownership means the authority to shape and evolve an IT system or a piece of software in alignment with organisational needs. It is the most powerful motivator and the indispensable basis for holding IT specialists responsible.
- 6. Degrees of freedom are sacred.**  
Specifications and standards for IT work still leave degrees of freedom around how to get things done. Taking these away turns keen professionals into mindless drones.
- 7. Productivity is a shy animal.**  
Interrupting IT professionals or forcing them into switching tasks

carries a cost. Maximum productivity (the “zone”) may only return hours later.

8. **Therefore, we know that money and pressure are not the way to buy top performance.**

Cranking up bonuses and applying more and more pressure will increase productivity only up to a point. To bring out the full potential of IT specialists, an environment that fosters ownership, leaves degrees of freedom, and provides uninterrupted quality time is essential.

9. **We reject the idea of IT as a mere service function.**

IT specialists do not get emotionally involved with a Service Level Agreement. But they can get excited about being an integral part of an organisation that they help shape and drive.

10. **We harness the power of personal relationships across the IT culture gap.**

We value processes, user training, policies, and issue trackers as pragmatic tools. But ultimately, successful IT work is about technical and non-technical people coming together to solve a problem.

11. **We use IT projects to pin down corporate priorities.**

Different parts of an organisation compete for IT resources. The necessary board-level priority decisions sharpen the strategic direction of the organisation.

12. **To summarise, we believe that people and passion are the foundation of successful IT.**

Robust systems, sustainable software, controlled processes, predictable deliveries, and financial efficiency are all built on this foundation.

This is it – these are the principles of IT-specific leadership in a nutshell. The Emotional IT Manifesto is not rocket science, it does not propose anything radically new. But few organisations live it.

Let's hope there will be more of them at the end of 2010.



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