Candidates for the information assurance (IA) master’s program I direct (the Norwich MSIA) must submit an essay responding to detailed questions for the admissions committee. My colleague Prof Peter Stephenson, PhD, CISM, CISSP, FICAF (the Associate Program Director of the MSIA) and I read these essays closely and base much of our decision on the quality of the thinking and of the writing presented by our candidates. We also learn a lot from our applicants’ stories.

In particular, I was struck recently by a comment an applicant included in her discussion of her perfectionistic tendencies (all details are obscured to protect confidentiality). Sally wrote, “Sometimes I get really frustrated when my ideas for protecting the network are rejected. For instance, I recently recommended to the CIO that we install a resource management software package to monitor critical elements of our production system (we have over 25,000 users who depend on it for their daily work) but he just said he didn’t think we’d get it into our budget this fiscal year. I was so mad I felt like completely giving up on any improvements to network management. I realize that my perfectionism sometimes makes me stop arguing without defending my ideas and I’ll be working on that aspect of my personality as we work through the weekly essays and the practical recommendations of the term papers.”

I think that this student (she was accepted, by the way) will have to learn to separate her sense of self from the ideas or proposals she makes. All of us naturally feel ego-involvement in our ideas; however, perceiving rejection of an idea as a rejection of oneself in some global sense is not healthy for us or for our organizations. For many years, I have been practicing and teaching _egoless work_ as enunciated many years ago by Prof Gerald (Jerry) Weinberg, one of the most influential thinkers and writers about the human dimension of software engineering and technical management[1].

In an article I wrote a few months ago for my graduate students, I included this passage:

>I learned about egoless work before some of our MSIA students were born: it was in the mid-1970s that I first read Gerald Weinberg's classic text, _The Psychology of Computer Programming_. Weinberg pointed out how easy it is for programmers to identify their work as an extension of themselves. The danger is that criticism of the program becomes emotionally distressing to such programmers; faced with failure of their code, some programmers will search desperately for excuses – user failure, bad operators, bad operating systems, and so on. Excessive ego-identification with their own code can prevent programmers from identifying errors in their own code; Weinberg writes, “A programmer who truly sees his program as an extension of his own ego is not going to be trying to find all the errors in that program. On the contrary, he is going to be trying to prove that the program is correct – even if this means the

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I summarize the key issue by telling my students that when someone corrects our work, it’s grounds for gratitude and appreciation, not resentment. If someone disagrees with a proposal, it’s an opportunity for exploration of why we disagree (Different assumptions? Different goals? Different rules of logic? Errors on one side or both?) rather than an attack on our personal worth as human beings or as professionals.

The other side of this attitude is that being wrong in a proposal is not a big deal: it’s just grounds for improvement of process or of product. Either way, if we respond positively to arguments, criticism of ideas and discussions of alternatives, all of us gain. When appropriate, “You’re right – let’s do it your way” is the response of a mature person who isn’t defining herself narrowly and doesn’t ego-identify with her own ideas.

To be clear here, this discussion in no way reduces the goal of doing a job right nor the legitimate pride one can feel in one’s accomplishments. The nice thing is that egoless work often extends such motivation and pride to a wider group, all of whom can contribute to success and feel pride in everyone’s accomplishments.

So the next time you find yourself getting hot under the collar when someone fails to approve a proposal, relax. It doesn’t mean they’re rejecting _you_.

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REFERENCES


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