

What's So Bad About Feeling Good?

In the quest for quality, whom do you benchmark yourself against? Sunil Malhotra has a suggestion...try competing against yourself! And make excellence a habit.

at 38,000 feet, halfway across the Atlantic, I'm furiously looking for inspiration. Germany was interesting, and now I am wondering what the US will have in store for me. Yesterday I was in a taxi, and the driver asked me if I knew how the Indian economy was going so strong. Although, like so many others, I know little about all this, I never want to miss an opportunity to market India abroad. Donning an air of authority (the poor guy got taken in by my professorial looks), I went on about how it was the magic of IT that got India going, that it needed knowledge of English, skilled people and lower investments... and how India was early in exploiting global opportunities—blah, blah, blah—the smartness of Indians!

I don't think he understood how it was all happening, but sure, he had been reading stuff, and believed every bit of the spiel I had been doling out so generously. I doubt I added any 'facts' to what he already knew. For me, it was enough that I was making an impression. In the evening, though, something he had said kept coming back to me. It was about the German engineering attitude—providing high levels of excellence, reliability and quality—that keep their products going on forever. He told me the story of a friend's Mercedes that ran for 800,000-odd km—and then the odometer went 'kaput'. So he doesn't know how much distance it has covered since then, but the car keeps on going. Personally, I think that is commercially a bad thing, but who cares what I think? Especially in Daimler!

Ah! I think I have found the inspiration I was desperately looking for a



little while ago. What could we do about our programming attitude? Especially since most of what we are doing in India is IT services. What I am about to say might not go down so well with the Indian IT community—and I would have to include my own company as well. I am talking about the quality of the software we develop—as products, as services and in whichever other conceivable form.

Why must we have a QA group that is responsible only for checking, if we have done what we were supposed to? If they have to find all the 'bugs' we create, they must come from a detective agency! I think we are stretching the definition of service a little too far in the holier-than-thou belief that if *'we are willing to fix the bugs free of cost'*, we can be absolved of the crime of having put them there in the first place. Do we realise at all that the client has to pay for this overhead—every which way?

I have recently been accused of being too critical about the direction India's IT is heading in. Call it wordplay, but that's just why I'm critical—because I think it is crucial that we do something about righting the situation NOW!

Since we all know about 'testing' being the last step of the standard Software Development Life Cycle (SDLC), we think of it as a quality checkpoint. Actually, it must simply be a step to see if everything works the way it was designed to work. This means—and I have to come back to my favourite analogy of the automobile—that a car is as good as its weakest part. This means that the people who design the inner cabin must take full responsibility for its final quality, as must the engine designer for the reliability of the engine. Therefore quality must be imbibed; it must exist in each and every IT professional, as a part of our occupational dharma!

When you decide about things for yourself, you normally don't care that much about what others say. It can, no doubt, put tremendous pressure on you since you are competing against yourself. Look at it my way. Whatever the outcome, you own it. Think about it... three letters that can be arranged intelligibly in two ways. OWN and NOW. Did I say two? Well, three. You WON!

In our company, we don't have a quality team, since all are supposed to be accountable for the quality they deliver. We recently received an analysis, from a key customer, of the quality of the 70-odd thousand lines of code we had delivered during the last four years. In another company, several heads would perhaps have rolled, just on the basis of the criticism contained in the document. Or we would have frantically set up a Quality Police. We did neither. Since we believe in the tenets we espouse, we saw the document as the only way that our programmers could experience, 'first-hand', the consequences of their own attitudes, and seize the opportunity to raise the bar.

Quality will, then, be an automatic habit, and will yield unequalled value. You know what—I really do believe that excellence can become a habit, and that one can actually get addicted to it! Try it sometime. **IT**

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