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Q&A: Tom Gilb on Quantifying Project Objectives

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One in MindEdge's series of question-and-answer sessions with leaders in project management.

The architects of Agile recognize Tom Gilb as a pioneer. The evolutionary project management (or Evo) he conceived in the 1960s was "[a]rguably the first Agile process," according to Jeff Sutherland, co-inventor of Scrum. Evo was the first project management methodology to break down a project into short iterations—typically a week to two—with consistent feedback and early product delivery. Gilb has published nine books, including *Principles of Software Engineering Management and Competitive Engineering*. He resides in Norway, where he is an active consultant in software engineering and large-scale systems management (e.g., in aircraft, telecoms and electronics).

Q: Is there a "Top 10" list of improvements typical of most projects?

Gilb: Not quite. I have a tradition with every project of looking for the 10 most critical improvement objectives that are expected by the stakeholders and the people paying. There are usually 10 or fewer improvements, but when I say "Top 10," I'm also saying, "Don't deal with more than 10." There's no point going beyond those 10 things, they're the most important and highest priority. So I don't want to know about the 50 things you want—I want a one-page list. And the highest priority goals are the ones in that critical set that are least satisfied at any time in the project.

Q: Don't project managers do that in the project plans and charters?

Gilb: For any project that's well underway, you can look back at the PowerPoint slides presented to management. You'll find headlines like "Main Objectives" and a list of nine or 10 goals written in what I call "software poetry." "Improve this," "reduce that" and "enhance flexibility." To do

that you must *quantify* those 10 things and make them measurable. Improve, enhance, reduce —all good words, but speak in degrees of change, look for ways to express them numerically. "State-of-the-art security" is not an objective; "99.98% reliability" is an objective.

But project managers are not trained to say "It's not clear what those objectives are." They'll focus on delivering some architecture, and expect those nine or 10 goodies will miraculously happen, but the connection is tenuous.

Q: Do Agile or Lean PM do that quantification any better than traditional project management?

Gilb: Agile has always been extremely bad at getting improvement requirements upfront. It doesn't do it at all, and doesn't feel bad that it doesn't try. It's focused on use cases at a lower level. But if you ask, where are the improvement objectives? Absolutely nothing. Agile has given more rapid feedback from stakeholders, which gives them the occasion to say, "Something must be wrong, that's not what I expected."But Agile, Scrum and [extreme programming] XP are no worse at total failures than software project management has always been. Non-agile is equally bad.

Q: They all involve iteration, like Evo does; how is Evo different?

Gilb: The Evo method says, "Define the critical goals quantitatively, and iterate toward the project until you have reached them." And measure them. In the old days, decades ago, I was recommending people deliver and measure every week, in an era when people had two-year projects which were two-years delayed. This has turned into the Agile movement, and my claim to fame is that I'm the "Grandfather of the Agile movement."

Q: That sounds deceptively obvious.

Gilb: It is! There's a multinational bank that I work for, and at any one time they have 600 IT projects going. And the guy I work for has 5,000 direct reports in IT——it's a big shop. He gave me samples of his most critical projects, and in none of them was there any sign of doing anything clear toward the most critical goals. We sat down and quantified those objectives, in an hour, maybe two. And he said "It's so simple, so obvious, why doesn't anyone do it?"

So that is my lesson to stakeholders and project funders. Demand clear, quantified objectives before happily dispensing money.

Q: What are you reading, for business and pleasure?

Gilb: One is *Systemantics* by John Gall, which like a Murphy's Law handbook. I've invited him talk at a seminar I hold each year in London, and this year's theme is "Principles and Patterns." And he sent me a novel he wrote called *First Queen, A Historical Novel on the Life of Hatshepsut, Queen of Egypt*, who reigned 1,500 years before Christ. And he's a pediatrician—so he's interesting, he's a pediatrician who can write about systems, then write a detailed historic novel.

A second one is *The Lean Startup* by Eric Ries. If you like radical project management, it's a

fascinating read. And it was second on the *New York Times* bestseller list—how many computer or software books are *New York Times* bestsellers?

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