

James Butler's Newsletter #87

Amuse, Inform and Inspire

November 2009

Welcome to my new readers! One version of this newsletter now goes to over 1000 people each month, which I am amazed and humbled by. Thanks, as always, for forwarding it on to those that you think may be interested. I love the day or so after an issue goes out, as my Inbox receives a steady trickle of comment, a few puns, and some reflection on the content of the latest missive.

Last month was no exception, and one in particular caught my eye. Stuart was concerned that his questioning of some projects may be construed as being a Death Eater, yet he felt he was normally shiny and happy (read last month's newsletter if you have no idea what I am talking about). By the end of the email, Stuart had coined Shiny Happy Death Eater to describe himself. I liked that idea!

Shiny Happy Death Eaters

Stuart finds that in some of his work his clients come up with ever more elaborate and inventive ways to waste money on harebrained projects, and sometimes his role is to stop the flurry of excitement and ask "Why are we doing this?" and "Who's the customer?". Is that being unduly negative, being a Death Eater?

Stuart used the phrase "informed negativity" to describe this position, and I often use "healthy cynicism". Is it helpful? In my view yes – to a degree. Belbin's work on high performing teams, and the roles within them, included the role of Monitor-Evaluator, the person in a team who questions decisions, considers implications and seeks viable solutions. (I score highly on this measure, which may colour the rest of this article!).

My experience in teams, and my knowledge of Belbin, has taught me that yes you do need these people – but you don't need a whole team of these people! So the truly Shiny Happy People need to come up with the ideas, bounce off the ceiling, have parties and expand projects beyond their remit, but the Shiny Happy Death Eaters (SHDE) need to recourse to reality, consider what is possible, and ask Stuart's killer question; "Why are we doing this?"

A full-on Death Eater will just negate the enthusiasm, recount the times ideas have failed and see problems not solutions. An SHDE will support good ideas, but help root out the bad ones. I like to think that's what I do with my monitor-evaluator hat on (Andy, the chair of the Beer Festival committee I serve on, will hopefully agree!)

So how does one deploy this informed negativity with out pouring water, or worse, on people's camp fires? I think one needs to remember the big picture, whatever your/the organisation's definition of success is and see whether the idea takes you closer or further from the goal. What I try to remember is to allow some ideas to fly, even if you are cynical, because they can produce the biggest successes.

And my mantra is to manage risk – if your informed negativity creates concerns about the downside of an idea, but the potential upside is worth a punt, put in place measures, systems and fallbacks to mitigate the risk of the downsides. If only I had deployed the same tactic in my stock investments!

I guess the overall lesson is that, like so much in life, too much of a good thing can be a weakness. Last month I urged you not to be Death Eaters, and I stand by that. I urged you to join the Shiny Happy People – and I stand by that too. But all in moderation, so make sure that within your team, or within your own mind, you have a bit of a Shiny Happy Death Eater to create the balance.

Final Words

Thanks to Stuart for developing the Death Eater theme, and I do like the Shiny Happy Death Eater idea (© Stuart, 2009). I think it is a brilliant metaphor for the coaching work we do with clients – having that healthy cynicism and informed negativity to help clients choose the right path and actions for them. If you're missing a bit of that in your business, why not get us in to help?

Warmest regards

James Butler

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