

Book Review: *Peopeware: Productive Projects and Teams*

Tom di Marco and Timothy Lister. New York: Dorset House, 1987 (revised edition 1999). 238pp. ISBN 0-932633-43-9

Editor's note: this is the first in an occasional series of reviews of classic titles. "Classic", because the books reviewed continue to be worth reading, several years after their first publication. In the world of professional publishing, that is rare. We welcome any suggestions for similar classic titles for review.

It's rare to find a professional book that makes you laugh out loud: *Peopeware*, is an example. I noticed people on the train staring at me as I raced through it. Written by two management consultants who specialise in project management, their wide-ranging book is of great interest to anyone who has ever been fascinated and infuriated by corporate culture and by crass management.

The authors' knack is to describe features of the contemporary corporate environment with an engaging wit that makes the reader see them freshly. Yes, you find yourself agreeing with the authors, why do we do that?

For example, I laughed at the chapter on the telephone, the great interrupter of concentration. The authors describe an episode where an imaginary Alexander Graham Bell proposes his new invention, the telephone, to a company board. "Ah, that's the beauty of the BellOPhone", he says proudly. "No matter what you are involved in at the time it rings, no matter how engrossed you are, you drop everything to answer it"

Not surprisingly, the company rejects such a disruptive innovation out of hand. It's true: if the telephone were invented today, companies would never allow it in their buildings. The telephone is just one of the authors' many targets, dismissed so abruptly that you only remember with shame that you ever introduced them to your suffering team – or had them introduced by a well-meaning but misguided boss. Management by objectives, performance bonuses, motivational posters, Parkinson's Law, even the term "professional" is roundly condemned when it is used to impose a dull conformity on corporate activity. Next time you hear the word used, think of the authors' definition: "*professional* means unsurprising. You will be considered professional to the extent you look, act, and think like everyone else, a perfect drone." As in, for example "it's simply not professional to wear a tie like that!"

Yet it would be a mistake to think of this as an entertainment, or simply a swipe at obvious targets. It is full of fascinating suggestions and ideas for managing projects and teams in organisations. Although the authors specialise in software development, almost none of the book is specific to developing software and would apply to any organisation

with more than two or three staff. As the authors emphasise throughout, software development is almost never a technical problem, but a human one. It's just part of the work you try to do, with more or less success, in an office environment that sometimes seems to be calculated to prevent you concentrating.

Repeatedly as I read the book I found myself surprised that I had accepted without question this or that common practice that is grounded in no good principle whatever. On hiring new staff, for example: we wouldn't dream of hiring a juggler without seeing him or her juggle, so why hire a programmer (or other member of a professional team) without getting some demonstration of their professional ability? Perhaps less widely used is the authors' suggested technique that an interview should include the colleagues who the candidate is going to work with: that he or she talks through a proposal or demonstration with the future colleagues.

I have some criticisms. The authors ignore their own recommendations for ignoring unverified research and opinions when they discuss architecture and working environment. Their insistence on closed spaces is today perhaps as formulaic as the insistence in the seventies and eighties on open-space office environments: in truth, neither is perfect. Their potty proposal, for "organic architecture" and "meta-plan" for a building, sounds romantically utopian and impractical. However, it is no bad thing to read a book that inspires you to agree or to disagree with enthusiasm. You forgive de Marco and Lister for a couple of wacky suggestions in return for the number of times they hit the bulls eye. On overtime, for example: "we don't work overtime so much to get the work done on time as to shield ourselves from blame when the work inevitably doesn't get done on time."

Read this book for a very healthy review of the assumptions you use when you manage; just be prepared to cause some discussion, or unrest when you implement the results. Managers don't give up the principles they work by without a struggle. In fact the authors suggest you implement changes one at a time: humans cannot cope with too much change.

Michael Upshall