



Commitment To Value

How to make technical projects worthwhile.

Wes Higbee

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Preface

I've always deeply enjoyed helping people. That moment when you realize the fruits of your labor fulfill a purpose in someone else's work. Helping is what excites me about work. Having an impact.

My career in technology started in high school when I was a lab assistant, helping people in the computer lab after school. It started as a simple job. By my senior year of high school, I was helping people across the school district: students, teachers, staff and others. It was rewarding work. When people hit stumbling blocks, I had the good fortune to help them overcome challenges.

I say fortune because I had the opportunity to help so many different people. And there's nothing like helping a teacher before being a student in their classroom. I became friends with many teachers, and learned many things I never would've learned in the classroom. We talked while waiting for software to install, or a computer to reboot. Sometimes we didn't even get to the task at hand because of a tantalizing headline in the news that day and a mutual interest in the subject.

My passion for technology grew into developing software. My mom planted the seeds of success with books, software, computers and encouragement. She knew how much I loved technology.

Periodically, I try to figure out how I got to where I am. I try to find what influences led me down the paths I've taken. In many cases, too much time has passed and I will never be able to reconstruct what led me to where I am now. Nonetheless, I still reflect because reflection is what leads to awareness and improvement.

When I reflect on how I approach work, and how I approach improving the work I do, I occasionally find deeply held, faulty assumptions. Things I never thought about, that significantly impact

the work I do. I enjoy finding these assumptions, invalidating them, and finding better ways to work.

About two years ago, I became aware of what may be one of the most counterproductive assumptions I've ever held. Work, up until that time, was always defined by two fundamental paradigms. I did what I was asked to do. And I was paid for it by the hour. I've searched high and low for the seeds of this assumption.

And I'm left with the conclusion that I subconsciously took for granted that work was about exchanging time for money. And the assumption that I could get enough done in an hour to make it worthwhile. This wasn't an intentional assumption, or something I arrived at after contemplation. This was simply the nature of every job I had ever had. Whether I was harvesting vegetables, babysitting, or coding a website, I did what was asked of me and tracked the time so I could be compensated. This is the nature of most jobs.

As my professional career developed, I encountered things that chiseled away at this subconscious assumption — experiences that repeated, solidifying an eventual place in my conscious mind.

Experiences like software that went completely unused. And complex software that users couldn't even understand, let alone use. Also, software that was underutilized. I noticed that people often didn't understand the software they had asked to be built. I saw frequent miscommunication. I saw customers over engineering requests to do things they would never need to do. I found myself suggesting things that would never be needed, in anticipation of making the software *flexible*.

I was used to taking requests, like taking an order at McDonald's. My focus was on breaking the order into steps to build the software necessary to fulfill the desired request. Like handing a person a bag of hamburgers and fries and then calling out, "next." I confused delivering what was asked for with being helpful.

Eventually I realized, what people want isn't always what they need. I started wondering, what is this particular piece of software worth to my customer? I was shocked when I realized I had no clue. I had simply built what I was asked to build, or at least my understanding of it.

Not knowing if it was worthwhile was disturbing. Even if I felt good about delivering what was asked for, it was a false sense of satisfaction. I was taken aback by the thought that I may actually be doing harm. Was I, at times, burning through customer resources to produce something that wasn't needed?

Furthermore, because of the ubiquity of billing by the hour, I always felt a need to improve my efficiency. To justify the hourly rate. In a never-ending quest to ensure the work was worth as much as possible, to ensure it was worth something, hopefully enough, to be worthwhile. And maybe, just maybe, to justify the increase that would be necessary to ensure I had room for growth within my own organization.

I became efficient at doing the wrong things, or potentially the wrong things. Occasionally there was a success in the mix. But the majority of the time, the requests weren't a good idea in the first place. That's just the nature of an obsession with ideas, tasks and actions. It detracts from a focus on what makes the work worthwhile.

People have ideas all the time. As a consultant, I realized part of my job is to help people validate and refine ideas. But that requires an entirely new skill set. That requires an understanding of value. That requires a conversation about results and desired outcomes and decomposing wants into needs.

I realized that I need to focus on being effective if I really want to help people. That efficiency takes a back seat to doing the right thing. I realized I had to make a commitment to creating value. That's what helping is really about. Helping isn't about praise for doing what shouldn't be done. It's about doing what should be done.

This book, is based on the commitment I made to value. It will help you understand what this commitment entails and offer some advice for making the commitment with technical work.

About the Author

Wes Higbee is passionate about helping organizations delight customers. He believes that successful customers are the foundation of sustainable business.

Wes has a strong background in helping companies achieve remarkable results with technology and software. He's had extensive experience developing software and working with teams to improve how software is developed to meet business objectives.

Although his primary focus is on outcomes, implementation often includes technical competency. Wes frequently speaks about impactful aspects of software development. He speaks professionally to help organizations improve. He also volunteers at user groups, code camps, and community organizations.

He's authored several online courses with Pluralsight. He writes extensively about both technical and non-technical aspects of software development on weshigbee.com. His written work includes articles featured on VeraSage, MSDN Magazine and InfoQ. He's been interviewed on "The Businessology Show" and "Art of Value" about the importance of value in software development. Occasionally, he also gets highly technical in a shared screencast or webinar.

To contact Wes Higbee:

E-mail: wes@fullcitytechnology.com

Web site: www.weshigbee.com¹, www.fullcitytechnology.com²

¹<http://www.weshigbee.com>

²<http://www.fullcitytechnology.com>

1. The Path

If there are two things I'm certain of in this world, they are the heat and humidity during a Midwest summer. I grew up in Nebraska, smack dab in the middle of the country. It's flat as far as the eye can see, at least until the corn starts growing. As a kid, I always looked forward to escaping the mundane. Summers were always time for family vacations. Being in the middle of the country, we had options in every direction.

But, no matter which direction we took, the drive was guaranteed to be arduous. We would try to pass time by competing to find the letters of the alphabet on road signs. Each person starts at A and calls out each letter as they spot it. First person to spot the letter claims it. Get to Z and you win.

But the time never seemed to pass fast enough. My sister and I would constantly ask "are we there yet" and "how much longer." Inevitably, the tension between my sister and I would spill over and erupt into bickering – often over simple things like what radio station to listen to.

I chuckle as I recollect the numerous occasions when Dad would yank the wheel to the right. He'd pull onto the shoulder, slam on the brakes, and put the car in park. He'd look over his shoulder and threaten, "I'll turn this car around and head back home."

As a kid, the car ride was at best bearable. It was simply the path to a destination of fun. I didn't care how we got there. I just wanted to get to the fun part.

Path The actions we take to get to a destination.

Road construction was frustrating. The specifics of the detour didn't matter but the extra seconds were palpable. Once we arrived, the memory of the journey faded and the fun began.

Most of the effort of our family vacation was the time spent driving a car to and from our destination. Deciding where to go and making a few reservations, perhaps 10 percent of the effort. Packing the car and driving was 90 percent. I've left out the vacation part because although it involved effort, it was the purpose of the journey.

My parents always picked a destination we would love. The fun we would have was the purpose of selecting a particular destination. The fun we would have justified the hours behind the wheel.

1.1 Path takers

Imagine if when we arrived at the destination, our parents simply dropped us off. And then what if our parents drove off to pick up another set of kids to transport to their summer vacation?

Back at our vacation destination, what if my sister and I were assigned a chaperon who would make sure we got to and from our adventures? Perhaps someone knowledgeable about the area. Someone who knew how to get the most out of a vacation.

Meanwhile, our parents were driving from city to city, transporting others. Specialized in dealing with bickering children and efficiently getting to the destination.

Of course this is ridiculous, the vacation isn't just for the kids. It's for the parents, too. And how happy would kids and parents be if they were separated, unless of course the kids were teenagers.

Professionally though, it's common to partition responsibilities based on the type of effort. It doesn't even require imagination. There are professional drivers. Perhaps there's money to be made in carting bickering kids to family vacations. If so, I bet Uber is working on it.

This is largely driven by the overzealous belief that minimizing costs will maximize profits. Partitioning workers into distinct skills leads to specialization, which boosts individual efficiency and will lead to saving money. But at what cost?

Driving to the vacation destination was an overwhelming majority of the effort. Making the decision about where to go was a small part of the effort. It might take an hour to pick a destination and then 10 hours to drive there.

This disparity in effort would lead many organizations to hire a pool of drivers and consolidate decision making into one person's responsibility. There would be 10 drivers assigned to each decision maker.

Seems reasonable right? After all, the drivers only need to be good at driving. We don't need drivers that make decisions about where to go for fun vacations. Nor do we need them hanging around enjoying those vacations when they get there.

If this were a large company, you might expect to find a business unit responsible for transportation, a business unit responsible for planning the vacation, and a business unit to provide local chaperons.

Purpose What we would ultimately like to accomplish, framed in terms of the impact we have on those around us. In business, it's the value we seek to create for our customers.

Professionally speaking, many people wind up becoming specialized drivers, able to efficiently take people on their journeys, wherever they decide to go. They pick up bosses and customers. They ask: Where to? They drop them off and move on to their next passengers.

They become entirely disconnected from the decision of where to go. Many of them start out in positions that are at least twice

removed from decision making. They become *good* at taking people places, carrying out actions – actions that are the result of decisions made by other individuals. Perhaps people they’ve never met, even after years of indirectly carrying out their decisions.

1.2 Purpose?

When this happens, decision making becomes concentrated among a group of individuals disjoint from those who carry out the decisions. Those carrying out decisions no longer know why a decision was made. Let alone if someone even made a decision. Purpose isn’t conveyed, only a path.

Open up any job listing and glance through the job descriptions. The listings are almost universally framed in terms of skills oriented toward carrying out actions. Walking a certain type of path. Employers have paths and they need people to walk them.

Consequently, many people seek jobs where the paths are enjoyable. Jobs where the actions are something they’ll enjoy doing year after year.

This is especially true in technical work. Many technologists love working with technology. I love working with technology. It’s a love that can be sustaining for years and decades. Technology changes so fast it’s easy to become consumed with keeping up. In other words, being consumed with all the different types of paths we may be asked to take.

Because of this added distraction, it’s even easier to lose sight of purpose. After all, if we’re isolated from decisions and consumed by technology we’re even further removed from understanding the role purpose plays.

And don’t forget, efficiency was the impetus for this specialization. The pressure is on to take technical paths faster and faster. To use new technologies to accelerate the car faster.

1.3 Avoiding failure

Occasionally the paths we take will lead to failure. Given enough time, everyone experiences failure in some form or another. Failure may be a technical solution that goes unused. Failure may be a customer that unexpectedly leaves. Failure is memorable. As path takers, we remember the paths that led to failure.

When we recognize that we're headed down a path that previously led to failure, we start to wonder. Especially if similar paths have led to repeated failure.

Our limited perspective puts us at a disadvantage that makes it difficult to recognize and avoid failure. We have a distorted understanding of success and failure. We may get feedback that a path led to success or failure. But we aren't always told that explicitly. The impact of our work is rarely our responsibility, so naturally we just don't hear about it. And we don't think to ask about it either, we're too busy with the next path.

It's more common to infer success and failure. Maybe our company did well for the month, so we take that as a sign of success for everything we did that month. Maybe the next month a customer is late paying a bill and finances are tight, so we interpret that as a sign of failure.

Our understanding of success and failure is often a mere assumption. An assumption that can easily be wrong. What led the company to do well one month, and not another? Does it necessarily have anything to do with what was done in each month?

Our assumptions of success and failure are subconsciously correlated to the paths we took. And, of course, we would like to do our part to mitigate failure, so we continue to make assumptions to avoid future failures.

We assume that a path itself can dictate success or failure. If not, we really can't help as path takers. We also tend to assume we're given

worthwhile paths. Why would we be asked to take a path that leads to failure?

These two assumptions conflict. When we experience an impending sense of doom, we wonder if the path is flawed. Certainly the destination is worthwhile, so we rectify this by looking for ways to tweak the path to arrive at the same destination.

Sometimes an alternative path works, or at least doesn't blow up. At a minimum we don't experience indications of failure. This reinforces our assumptions and our ability to use them to avoid failure.

But, eventually we realize we aren't consistent in altering paths to avoid failure. We randomly experience success and failure. Unfortunately this can take years to recognize.

At this point, hopefully, we ask the important question: Why?

Why are we failing? Why are we succeeding?

Questioning the sources of success and failure should lead us back to one simple question. Is what we're doing for our customers worthwhile to them and to our organization?

The path we take isn't the source of worth. A path is neither good nor bad. A path is neither valuable nor worthless. A path is simply a means to a destination. The destination itself isn't a source of value, either. It's the experiences for our customers and ourselves at a destination that makes the journey worthwhile.

All the while we've been digging for truth in the wrong direction.

This leads to asking questions and challenging assumptions we've held for a long time. Questions such as: What was the reason for taking this path? Why are we doing this? What path should we be on? Why is the destination desirable? What is the purpose of traveling to the destination? What value do we derive from the destination? What value does our customer derive?

1.4 Finding purpose

And the shock sets in when we realize nobody knows what makes the path and destination worthwhile. We may be lucky enough to follow the chain of decision makers, only to realize no decision was made. When a decision was made, we find it was made with insufficient or irrelevant considerations.

Decision The act of determining a destination, and subsequently the path, to fulfill a purpose.

We begin to realize past failures were really correlated to the purpose of the destination, or the lack thereof. And past successes were probably the result of good fortune, not tactical thinking.

We realize obsession with the path is contagious. Not only does it dominate the focus of path takers, but of decision makers and customers. When decision makers become obsessed with paths, they simply become channels to convey the paths and to convey actions and tasks.

Anyone who makes a mediocre attempt to organize ideas, knows ideas come easily but don't die without a fight. It's human nature to have a plethora of ideas, it's an expression of our creativity. Ideas are exciting.

When decision making is concentrated among a very small group of individuals, it becomes increasingly likely that ideas slip through as the impetus for action. Maybe the idea came from an innate understanding of purpose. But it's just as likely to have come from thin air.

With the centralization of decision making, those deciding end up with no one to turn to, to vet their decisions. Ideas will be acted upon – even worthless ideas.

This problem is compounded when decisions are made and paths are delegated from customer to provider, as is virtually ubiquitous

in outsourced technical work. There's a chain of decision making within a customer's organization that may be missing or not taken into consideration. Paths come disguised as customer requests. And the customer is always right, right?

1.5 Lost in indirection

The simplistic model of a single decision maker and a pool of path takers is far from reality. Many organizations erect hierarchies whereby decision making is consolidated at the top. Paths are handed down from above. A path is split up as it travels through different hierarchies and departments within the organization.

Like slicing a pie. It's whole at the top. It's split among the immediate subordinates. Those subordinates split their slices for their subordinates and so on.

One person determines the purpose and makes a decision about the destination. The work to get to that destination is split into many smaller paths based on the effort required and the pools of workers available. Portions of the journey are delegated to subordinates that further slice their portions into actions for other subordinates to act upon.

This leads to over-commitment at its worse. The entire path is laid out in advance, with no ability to correct course in transit. All planning has to happen before any action. All action must happen before any reaction.

The most subordinate of actions must be completed before managers can verify their slices are complete. Those managers must then report back up the chain to the person who made the initial decision. The decider often must wait for all managers to report back. At this time, the decider can assess the result and only then correct course.

If there's a problem, even if someone recognizes it, they may not

think to question the decisions of those up the chain. If they do reach out, the person they reach out to probably won't have the perspective to help. They may own a larger piece of the pie but they still don't know what the pie looks like. At best they may reach further up the bureaucracy, but often that search is futile. It's hard to pass a message between too many people before it's entirely lost.

Think about what happens when hierarchies span customer and provider relationships. Where communication is subject to the culture of multiple organizations with separate hierarchies.

Taxis

One morning in Chicago I stood waiting in the middle of a busy street. I was on my way to catch a flight. I have a tendency to worry a little too much about missing flights. A taxi pulled up and I hopped in.

Hurriedly, I asked to be taken to O'Hare International Airport. A few minutes in to the drive, the driver asked what flight I was on, so he could drop me off at the right terminal.

I panicked a little as I asked myself, is it Southwest? Frantically I pulled out my phone. I found my flight confirmation and Southwest it was. I told the driver as a sinking feeling set in. I vaguely remembered that Southwest only operates out of one of the two major airports in Chicago. But I couldn't remember which. Fortunately the driver was able to react, and replied back, "Oh you mean Midway, not O'Hare."

Midway is the airport Southwest operates out of. Coincidentally, it's south and west of downtown, while O'Hare is north and west. And, the only decent way to get from one to the other is to drive in and out of downtown. Not a quick mistake to correct. Something that can easily lead to a missed flight. Especially with Chicago's traffic.

Imagine if the driver had simply taken me to my requested destination, like so many often do. Or, if he had waited to ask

about the airline until he was much closer to O'Hare. Imagine, if the decision were twice removed and he couldn't even ask a question like this.



Take a minute to consider the work you do. Make a list of the major projects you've recently worked on. Try to list at least three. Then for each project, answer the following questions:

What does your involvement entail? What's your path? Who else are you working with?

What's your destination? What's the outcome you're responsible for accomplishing?

Who made the decision for you to head down this path? How were you involved in the decision-making process?

Ultimately, how does the outcome of your work impact the customers of your organization?

Is your destination an intermediate result on a larger path to deliver value to your customers?

Who else is responsible for making decisions that impact the value you create for your customers?

How do customer requests come in to your organization?

Pick a big customer and list the decision makers. What decisions have they made recently that led to work within your organization?