

Developer on the Move

By Dr. Neil Roodyn

One of the most enlightening things about being able to travel so far and wide is the number of interesting people I encounter and the array of fascinating stories I hear. This is the first in a series of short articles that I will write to try to bring some of that enlightenment back to you, so you can avoid the hassle of airports, lost luggage and terrible weather.

Reloaded for Real

Boot up a new Operating System for your Head

Jim McCarthy has been around the software industry for quite a few years now. He is probably most well known to developers for his book Dynamics of Software Development which came out in the early nineties. This book presented a radical new way of working in teams to develop software. Jim (with the help of Michele his wife) suggested teams communicated, worked very closely together (with each other and the goal setter), prevented burn-out by keeping to fixed hours and a whole host of other ideas, 50 in all. For many of us the ideas slotted into a form of Rapid Development we were practicing. It was not until the late nineties that I realized that we were being agile and by adding a few extra rules and practices the people I was working with became extreme programming teams. So Jim had (without realizing it at the time) been a strong force in helping some of us make the agile movement become a reality.

So what have Jim and Michele been working on since then?

One of the things they discovered when working with teams was the importance of protocols to govern how the members of a team can best interoperate. The essential protocols have been grouped together into what the McCarthy's call The Core. They have published these in a book entitled Software for Your Head. Being a fan I bought the book when it was first published and it molded nicely to the work I was doing mentoring and coaching teams to work in a more agile way. I was discovering more and more that the technical aspect of my role was being overshadowed by the need to help the team members work as a team rather than a group of individuals.

On a recent trip to the USA I made contact with Jim and Michele and went up to visit them in their house just outside Seattle. I hoped to make new friends and be further enlightened by the work they have been doing. I was not disappointed.

Jim describes The Core as the base level operating system upon which a team can start to build applications. What does he mean by this? In order for two computers (the hardware) to work with each other they need to have a defined set of protocols that both computers can interpret. For many computers these protocols are built into the operating system and then applications, such as instant messenger, that can utilize the communication channel, are built to run on the operating system. Imagine that humans are the hardware; in order to interact with other humans we need a protocol. At the low level this protocol consists of our senses, on top of that level we have a language. When two humans can interpret the same language they can communicate but this does not guarantee collaborative interoperation. The Core is a set of rules for our minds that help us achieve greater success in the effort of team play. But the 'software' or set of rules that

make up The Core protocols is only the base level on which to build ‘applications’, so Jim equates the Core with an Operating System for the brain.

One of the problems I have encountered when introducing the Software for your Head book to a team is the fact that while Jim and Michele have written exactly what they mean, many of the readers find it difficult to ‘get it’. Some of The Core protocols are to some degree counterintuitive and, much like some of the agile practices, require a suspension of disbelief and proving by doing it. To help solve this problem the McCarthy’s take their metaphor further by running BootCamp, 5 day events, which aim to help the delegates boot up their new Operating System. They describe people who have adopted The Core as people who are ‘booted’. Once someone is booted they can work on applications with other people who have been booted. These applications are the activities that a team needs to carry out, such as hold a meeting or distribute work. Initially the McCarthy’s ran BootCamps for software development teams but now they are finding that other organizations are being booted in order to help them create better products and provide better solutions as teams.

So what does the Core ‘Operating System’ actually consist of? It is a set of protocols for behaviour described as patterns. It is telling that the authors come from a software background as much of the book is written like a software manual. For the software community this is ideal, but people from other backgrounds have expressed a difficulty in understanding the style of the book. The book is split into 4 key sections, which reflect the important areas of The Core; Check In, Decider, Alignment and Shared Vision. Each of these key areas presents a well defined problem that is common in team behaviours and presents patterns for solving the problem. Along with the patterns for the solution the text discusses anti patterns, which are disruptive behaviours that hinder the team. Often it is enough to just be able to identify these patterns so you can prevent them from occurring, although some of the anti-patterns come with suggested solutions.

But take heed this is not a silver bullet for a dysfunctional team, the first step is to get the team to want to boot. Without this agreement no amount of clever patterns or protocols will help them.

If you do work with a team, I would bet the team could benefit from some of the protocols presented in The Core and I would suggest you get hold of a copy of the book. The teams I have introduced the ideas to have used them to their benefit and so far the news is only good.

English born, Dr. Neil travels the world working with software companies. He loves Australia, where he spends the summer enjoying the Sydney lifestyle and helping software development teams get more productive. Dr. Neil spends his other summer each year flying between northern Europe and the USA working with software teams and writing about his experiences. Neil brings his business and technical skills to the companies he works with to ensure he has happy customers.

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