

The sad predicament of the unempowered manager

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I just made up that term now because I needed a word to describe the situation where some manager is put in charge of a feature but is not given a staff to implement that feature. This happens more often than you might think, since there are many features that are “horizontal”, i.e., features which affect all teams throughout the project. So-called *taxes* often fall into this category, such as power management, accessibility, and multiple monitors. (Larry Osterman calls them **bilities*. I call them *taxes*.) The unempowered manager is in a predicament, having been assigned a task without a staff to accomplish it. All the unempowered manager can do is nag other people, usually about bugs that fall into the manager’s area. Now, most of these unempowered managers understand that they are just one of many demands on the development teams, providing advice as necessary (since they have valuable specialized knowledge about the problem area) but basically trying to stay out of the way. Others, on the other hand, take upon themselves a much more active role in “driving” their pet issues. This means that I will get mail like this:

You have an elephant† bug

The following elephant bug is assigned to you:

16384 Elephants not available in animal dropdown box (opened 2006/05/12)

What is the ETA for fixing this bug?

(signed)

Somebody you’ve never heard of

This is another case of “You’re not my manager”. My manager decides what tasks I should be working on and in what order. If you think this bug should be higher on my priority list, feel free to set up a little meeting with my manager to work this out. Until then, don’t bug me. I have work to do. “But elephant-compatibility is important.” Are you saying that all my other tasks are unimportant? What makes elephant-compatibility more important than my other tasks? Do you even know what my other tasks are? At one point, this got so bad, with many managers nagging me about their favorite bugs on a nearly daily basis, that I created a SharePoint site‡ called “Raymond’s task list for <date>”. Whenever somebody sent me nag

mail, I replied, “I have added your request to my SharePoint site and assigned it a default priority.” And then I never heard from them again. **For those new to this web site** (and a reminder to those with poor memory): †I disguise the name because (1) it’s not important to the story, and because (2) the goal is not to ridicule but rather to illustrate a point. Attempts to guess what “elephant” is will be deleted. Don’t make me delete further stories in this series like I did with “Stories about Bob.” **Nitpicker’s corner** ‡Or, if you’re a trademark lawyer, “A Web site powered by Microsoft® SharePoint® services.”

*Here’s your stupid asterisk.

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