

Herding cats

Building software is a complex, challenging and ultimately very risky business. With the best will in the world, many projects fail under the pressure of a million and one "what if" scenarios – each every bit as likely as the other - and it's a wonder that anybody in their right mind would even consider embarking on such folly.

As team leader, you have taken on the software equivalent of the Labours of Hercules. Not only do you have to provide leadership for a bunch of very well educated, free-thinking – and ultimately uncontrollable – software developers, but you also have to manage your project sponsors (who are often equally well-educated, free-thinking and uncontrollable, but with the added bonus of knowing little or nothing about software development and their role in it), your project manager (ditto at least half the time) and pretty much anybody else who sticks their oar into your team's business.

Having done the job a few times, I know from experience that the team leader is usually the supporting wall that holds up the entire house. Unlike architects and project managers, team leaders have a direct effect on the code that gets produced, largely because they're one of the people actually writing it.

Developers have little choice but to heed their technical lead's advice, but can happily ignore any edict issued by pretty much anybody else involved in the project. ("Now, where was that architecture standards document? Hmm, I appear to have mislaid it...") That's not to say that the developers will actually do what you tell them to, though. Your input will have an effect, just probably not the effect you were counting on.

And so it is with herding cats. Try as you might, you'll never get Tiddles and Bam-Bam to go where you want them to. You can beat them, shout at them, spray them with water pistols – and it will have an effect, but very probably not the effect you were after.

It is the delusion of control, that you can impose order on such rampant complexity, that a lot of team leaders suffer from. In reality, you have no control. They're going to do what they're going to do...

So how do you herd cats, then? Here's one suggestion – .

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