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MEDIA

## Presidential Aides

In the spirit of the current times, I'll use the U.S. presidency as a metaphor for my point today. Software development managers are like presidents and developers are like presidential aides. The job of the president is a difficult one. He's supposed to know everything about everything and be able to make life-and-death decisions based on all facts, with full confidence, and without blinking. Sounds just like your software development manager, doesn't it?

It's not possible for the president to really know everything or do his own research, so he surrounds himself with trusted aides who do that work. They're supposed to research all issues that fall within their problem domain, determine which info is important, then present a summary of that data along with their recommended solution to the president. The president then reviews the information, quickly explores options (he doesn't have time to go in-depth into anything), and in most cases rubber-stamps the recommendation of his aide. He then goes out to the Rose Garden to sign an agriculture bill and get his picture taken with Miss Junior Asparagus and her vegetable escorts. To the public, the president appears to have deeply investigated all the facts and then made the "right" decision. The truth isn't quite so tidy.

What really happened was that the president's aide has his or her own aides, and those aides have their own aides. Work orders, as well as other things, roll downhill. So the real work of investigating the issue went to 11 interns who help out at the White House when not attending classes at George Washington University, doing homework, or participating in a public protest on the Mall. They dig up what they can on the issue, then determine what information they think is important and pass it and their recommendations on to their boss. They slant the information to reflect their biases and shine a better light on the solution they prefer. The boss summarizes the information he thinks is important, writes up a recommendation, and presents it to his boss. He or she summarizes the information even more, assumes the recommendation given was objective and unbiased, then adds his or her own slant to the recommendation. By the time the information and recommendation reach the president, they don't much resemble the information compiled during the low-level research. Rather, the information is summarized enough to have lost its connection with the true details and the recommendation has been slanted multiple times. Based on that information, the president arrives at a decision and makes a decree.

It's important for him to be able to trust his aides, their judgment, and the fact that they don't "spin" the information before giving it to him. This is the same with software development groups. IT managers, IS managers, CIO officers, and so on are all at the mercy of their underlings. Most decisions they make regarding technologies are based on information gathered by and recommendations provided by their programmers and analysts.

If the decision turns out to be a bad one, it's usually the president who is blamed and who pays the price. Likewise, it's not uncommon for IS managers to lose their jobs when the big system that had substantial cost overruns turns out to be a flop.

You're just like a presidential aide. You have the power to spin information in such a way that your manager will make the "right" decision. Consider this: you don't know everything your manager knows or your manager's manager knows, so your recommendation might not be the right decision for your company. If you recommend Java, for example, because you want to learn Java, not because it's the right tool for the job, then your selfish desire may negatively impact the future of your company. The best case is that it will have no negative impact. Worst case is that the bad decision leads to costs your company can't afford or a system that doesn't meet its needs. Either way, your company can lose its competitive advantage and possibly even go out of business, all due to your biased influence on an important decision.

It's your ethical duty to be objective in your research and give your managers the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. They deserve nothing less than full disclosure. Give them all the information they need so they can make the right decision. It may not be the decision you or I would choose, but it's more likely to be the right decision for the company. ▼

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