

A Serenity Prayer Secret: Don't Stress about Systems

Why when your HR systems stress you, there is a solution

Serenity and systems work too often present something of an oxymoron to self in HR or other 'people' functions. If things do feel that way, then this article is for you. For many who have not grown up through a technology-based career, working with people technology projects starts out fraught with impossibilities, impenetrability and stress. Much of that sense of stress comes from a feeling of disempowerment – we're at the mercy of both the tech itself and the professionals operating dark arts around it.

Here I use a secular version of the well-known Serenity Prayer, explained and translated into technology project context, to convince you that with acceptance, courage and wisdom, serenity and your HR systems project are compatible colleagues at your desk.

A background

Most of us are familiar with the Serenity Prayer. It is now widely agreed that it was written by the American Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, in the 1930's and is best known for its adoption by the Alcoholics Anonymous association. (Search for 'funny serenity prayer' for a good number of variants, which absolve me from concern that I use here in such a different context. Because we might agree to start this feature with a chill-pill: whilst people technology is a great enabler and a thoroughly great work mission, it's unlikely to be the secret to your lifetime's health and happiness).

For me, however, the message makes for a great philosophy by which to approach working life – and the getting to grips with leading on HR technology project, or indeed a wider tech strategy you're charged with delivering. Focus on courage, acceptance and wisdom to solve your stress with your systems mission.



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Here is my favourite secular version of the familiar prayer and it is the working premise for the way in which I suggest you can find calm control in your approach at work:

- **I will strive to accept the things I cannot change**
- **Change the things I can and should**
- **And find the wisdom to know the difference**

How do the 3 lines of the Serenity Prayer make a difference to how you can think about working with HR technology?

- It is within our gift to adopt a pragmatic acceptance. We are fighting losing battles to find, create or, worse still, customise the 'perfect' system, nor will every critical path run smooth.
- We can take a bold approach to change. Be brave and have the courage to ask the right questions, so that you can also have the courage to map systems for employees, future employees, managers and super-users differently other than by replication of what has gone before.
- And the really critical bit – you don't need to be an IT expert to find out the answers as to how to get optimum results from your HR technology investment. All the wisdom you need comes from being able to identify what you know, need to know and the impact it will make.

The Serenity Prayer emphasises these values: acceptance, courage and wisdom.

"I will take you through an approach to technology work and project-thinking in our context of people technology at different levels.

We'll see how to use a choice to accept, to be courageous and to be wise to do something perhaps less profound than the prayer intended, but usefully positive." and pragmatic if you'd like to get your HR technology job right."

Apply acceptance, courage and wisdom to lead at different levels:

- **Enabling:**
Strategic Impact
- **Enablers:**
Expertise & Perspectives
- **Enablers' Tools:**
Project methods
- **Tools:**
Configuration, Process & Design

My levels are not some form of fancy model to worry you must learn but rather a visual way to demonstrate and explain:

- Descending degree of effort in hours but
- Ascending degree of suggested focus for maximum impact and
- At all levels equal band-width for applying wisdom with a hefty dose of acceptance and courage for least stress

Thinking within your implementation project all about configuration and process, which can appear to be all there is to it, is a trap that is not helped by the fact that external suppliers' scope is often limited to these kind of questions. In this little visual, this base layer looks biggest because of its misleading guise as the lion's share of the work that gets done. But it's the bottom of a pyramid of importance. Why does how you configure matter if you can't apply it in a sensible way?

Build on the implementation and development work that your systems stars do for you using the enablers of expertise, perspective and (hopefully) a project management method and you are a level more effectively into sound systems planning. Top of the tree is the strategic impact.

Keep looking at the impact to keep calm focus and make those wise choices.

Tools: the Building Blocks of Configuration, Process and Design

This year I've authored a series offering in 12 parts an end-to-end toolkit of advice through the stages of an HR technology implementation project, which make for Smooth Success. You might be surprised that only 1 of those 12 parts is actually about how to configure and set up systems well. I called this part the 'building blocks' of project.

What about the other 11 parts? Whilst many days of time are going to be spent process-mapping, working through blueprints (to risk digression, don't bother!), changing settings, writing calculations or even code and testing, to lead or manage an effective project these things will misfire unless handled with active awareness of stakeholders, data, context, method and the fundamental business case.

The same point is made here to take control over HR technology; don't be fooled that where the hours lie in activity lie the secrets to success.

My sub-title to this article could quite well be 'The Systems Serenity Secret: why customisations are rarely the answer'. Most systems applied on scale (typically any chosen in organisations with more

than 100 or so employees, as a rough guide) are configurable. The effect of cloud deployment is to make this even more true, as product suppliers can offer you changes – either directly or by providing platforms that make offering you design choices more palatable on time and cost. T&C's.

A deeper degree of design work is done when you try to develop the system determinedly differently from how it is designed – that's customisation. Most new systems are not intended to be inherently customisable. If your organisation is looking at heavy customisation or you have received the advice that what you need your process to do cannot be done, then this may give you a clue to look more closely at that process.

How does this relate to the serene values about acceptance, courage and wisdom?

To my mind, the Serenity Prayer values need to be looked at in a jumbly order. Here is the serene style of thinking: Start with wisdom. Your wise questions about the building blocks of implementation might be, on configuration and process respectively:

*“Do I understand the impact of the build I am making?
(Have I asked?!)”*

“Why do I have this process the way that I do?”

“Can I make a change or choice here if I wish to?”

Have the courage to use the system differently if you need to. For example, there are inventive ways to use self-service forms to capture information that can be used to serve different people functions other than that suggested. You could use learning evaluation options to gather other types of feedback; you could use performance review screens and flows to guide other discussion-based people process between staff member and manager. These are ways that use the natural design of the system to ways that feel like something that is not apparently ‘out-of-the-box’.

Take bold process moves. Ditch supporting paperwork and duplication of admin processes, or manual checks, that make you feel just slightly happier about the small proportion of workflow process automation that ‘go wrong’. Starter and leaver processes are a good example of where I have worked with many an organisation insistent on copying in like-for-like with an exactitude that has no logical basis. However, there will be times when acceptance is a good option.

When you pick up on the clue that you’re looking at customisation options or asking for something apparently difficult, I hope the above makes clear that I’d like you to take the opportunity to decide if it is your organisation that is ahead of the game, or if there is a system limitation that you need to live with.

Certain complexities of context are common not to be worked out perfectly. Example real instances spring to mind of multiple job-holdings, matrix management or super-imposed management hierarchies, highly-detailed bonus schemes or rules about entitlements. As independent specialists, we’ve at times examined the options and concluded that ‘the tech says no’.

Acceptance in the context of configuration and process is the business of the work-around. The best consultants love this word, because we are providing a solution against the odds!

Recap: wise questions, bold moves, accepting and working with realities.

Enablers: Methods and Perspectives

The middle layers of top-to-bottom project cool and calm are those enabling factors of the expertise, the methods and the perspectives that you bring to your work with HR systems development. This includes:

- Project management method
- How you lead and manage your internal project team
- Stakeholder relationship management methods
- Composition of project teams
- Sourcing of experts
- Governance structures to make decisions

Let's rehearse the serene thinking:

Your wise questions start with 'How much do I need to know about this?'

Build your understanding with the networking opportunities available to you and triangulate those sources. We at Phase 3 Consulting believe that an informed client has the best chances of success and of making the most therefore of their project partnerships. Find a user group, get in touch.

Be informed by the right people. After all, as I'm advocating you keep that so-called helicopter view, you will rely on specialists to do much of the doing at foundation level, and to advise you on the answers to your wise questions. (Sorting the Stakeholders in the Smooth Steps series might help you with this.)

On method, my question is admittedly a challenging one: **'Where is my control? How will I find it?'** A project management methodology doesn't need to be heavy duty, but for sure something is required. (Here are plenty of ideas from me about how to tailor to a very small-scale project and you might enjoy a light take on what to look out for in a Project Manager job description. And try HR as the Professional Project Manager if you've a DIY job to be done with the methods.)

The courage at this level might come from looking outside of your sector, it might come from forming your own project techniques rather than accepting an off-the-shelf package and it should certainly come from making the most of your consultancy services. These are about applying the answers you've heard from newfound wisdom.

Apply new wisdoms to be able to decide for yourselves.

I would advise all of our customers to get hands on to the degree that they can, even if they are in a leadership role and it is a fleeting sit in the 'screen-chair-interface' (= favourite IT professionals scathing comment about the average ability of the 'occasional' user). See it for real. Just for a bit.

Quiz us as consultants and understand the impact. Accept that you may need to hear expert opinions and take your choices. (I know this mini blog about expert opinion and yet whilst you are still the client is a popular one and it helps that it's about coffee.)

Expert opinion is a valid thing when it comes to choices with your technology implementations. For example, there may be two equally valid ways to build an organisation's structure and hierarchy and certainly many ways to categorise your data or use different blank system spaces to store it. Some go for more of the in-project work braved within live systems and there are more or less aggressive ways to manage project go-live moments. More generally I observe technical consultants preferring build-up or build-down tactics for ending up with even the same agreed end design.

You might hear firm advocates from the experts on both sides of these debates and your organisation will have to make a choice. Accept this, but understand the impact.

By understanding impacts, you will feel braver in taking choices!

Enabling and Achieving Strategic Impact

Finally, I hope that you make it to that which we are all aiming for in our serenity – the strategic impact. Here we are rooted in some realities to accept. Clearly these are contextual, but perhaps for you this is as simple as accepting that with every HR system there comes compromise.

Perhaps you'd like to be operating with a full ERP system, but it's not affordable. Perhaps you'd like to think that the choice of system itself is to blame for poor adoption in the organisation, for payroll inaccuracies or for management information that is apparently out-of-date. Avoid going out to buy new kit when might do greater good with the tough message that 'A bad workman doesn't blame his tools'. Take a courageous step and revisit the Most often, there is the reality of accepting limitations without sinking the investments made.

There is a balance to be struck between bringing such realities into focus to enable brave decision-making and a pragmatism which allows the organisation to maximise on investment and keep a positive focus on great potential with a powerful and often integrated HRIS products.

Take a courageous step and revisit the benefits.

It is never too late to do so. Engaging in an ROI exercise cannot in itself impact those returns, or lack of returns, but it can allow you, your consultants and your teams, to tweak plans in time to see results. Compare the real impact of costs, savings and value-add at different levels, in different volumes and with different mitigation of risk and you could see surprising results. Looking at the weather forecast will not actually bring on the rain!

It is easier these days than when I first wrote a Serenity Prayer for systems back in 2014 to ask and answer wise questions because of the explosion in the concept of HR Analytics (or People Analytics). Analytics new-style come into their own when those leading such a project really do start with the right, relevant business questions. Neatness is nice to end a piece of writing. I'd like to have a rather more sophisticated wise question on impact and strategic, but strategic is just as compatible with simple as serenity is with systems work:

“Do I have one? A strategy, that is? If not, am I at least thinking strategically? If I don't, where am I going to get an HR systems strategy from?”

My clue to the last question here is that your people technology strategy must surely occupy a Venn diagram with your overall organisational aims, together with perhaps the IT, risk and finance strategies – and all with a very big interlinking middle.

When your People Technology Projects stress you, there is a solution

To conclude, here is a suggestion for ensuring that being in charge of an HR or related technology project and your serenity remain comfortably at the same desk. It is a suggested Systems Serenity Prayer:

- **Take a deep breath,**
- **Be bold and**
- **Ask a ton of questions**

Play around with the values of acceptance, courage and wisdom. Play around with the levels of thinking, intervention and involvement that you need to apply these values to:

- What do you need to settle on and make the best of?
- What could you be brave to change?
- Should you do that, and how are you going to find out?

To end on a personal note, several years on and I don't stress about HR systems and I carry considerably more responsibility for them. I choose to advocate that when it comes to people technology, yes, it can generally be done.