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Problem Solving: Deadlines and Context

ARTICLE

By Steve Berczuk | July 28, 2012

SUMMARY

One of the more difficult challenges people and teams have in the face of deadline pressure is taking time to consider how to approach a problem rather than just diving in with a solution approach that you know will work.

One of the more difficult challenges people and teams have in the face of deadline pressure is taking time to consider how to approach a problem rather than just diving in with a solution approach that you know will work.

In college, when I was taking a devices and circuits class, I found myself stuck on a problem on the first problem set of the semester. I asked an upperclassman for help and we determined that the problem could be solved by setting up a system of something like 12 equations, and grinding through the process of solving it. His solution was correct of course, but I wondered if this approach might be more complex than it needed to be given that it was for one of a number of problems in the first problem set of the course, and given that the theme of the first few classes was more conceptual than about doing calculations.

When I later saw the solution to the problem it turned out that by making some simplifying assumptions, the 12 equations reduced to 2, and the solution was quite simple and quick. The lesson that the problem was mean to teach was not how to solve linear equations, but about how to understand when how to use a simple model to understand a complex circuit. The direct, labor intensive approach ignored what the problem was meant to teach.

I don't recall much about the specifics of the problem, but one thing I learned from that

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Sometimes just working harder is the right thing to do. But if you need to get past a deadline, before diving in to solving a problem it's good to think about whether you're doing more work than the situation merits, and that, perhaps, you are overlooking a simpler, quicker, solution.

Topics: people management,

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Steve Berczuk is a Principal Software Engineer with experience as a manager, Scrum Master and technical lead in Boston, MA. The author of *Software Configuration Management Patterns: Effective Teamwork, Practical Integration*, he is a recognized expert in software configuration management and agile software development. Steve is passionate about helping teams work effectively to produce quality software. He has an M.S. in operations research from Stanford University and an S.B. in Electrical Engineering from MIT, and is a Certified ScrumMaster. Contact Steve at steve@berczuk.com or visit berczuk.com and follow his blog at blog.berczuk.com.

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