

GET IN BED

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Transfer Wisdom Workshop January 23, 2003

During a long and checkered professional career, I was taught to “never get in bed with the customer.” While working for the government (NASA and US Air Force), “getting in bed” with the customer/supplier would, at worst, compromise your objectivity and result in a conflict of interest, and, at best, give the appearance of impropriety.

While working in private industry, we were told that “getting in bed” with the customer/supplier would reveal minor flaws in your product or process that the customer didn’t really need to know about. We were told that the customer would nitpick you to death with questions and concerns that weren’t important, and that decision-making would be delayed by bringing someone else into the decision making process. We were told that proprietary products or design processes would be revealed to someone without a “need-to-know.”

One project changed my feelings about all that. Project KAFFU (Kiwi Air Force Fighter Upgrade) was a fighter retrofit program for the Royal New Zealand Air Force; we were trying to give F-16 capabilities to old A-4 fighter aircraft. When the contractor I was working for won the competition, the contract included sharing office space with the Royal New Zealand Air Force engineers, pilots, and maintainers throughout the entire development, prototype, and flight test effort—cradle-to-grave, as far as the engineering effort was concerned.

We sat side-by-side with these guys. They participated in every facet of the engineering development program. They helped write requirements, software, drawings, specifications, test plans, test procedures and test reports. They worked in the lab integrating and testing hardware and software. They knew how things worked, and they saw things fail. They saw smart and dumb engineers and managers. They worked and played with all of us. Aside from a few classified areas, they had full access to our entire facility—our engineering labs, work areas and our cafeteria.

They were truly, fully, integrated into our engineering team. And the results?

We had product advocates (the Royal New Zealand Air Force engineers) who were trusted by both the customer (the Royal New Zealand Air Force) and the supplier (us). With less engineering work for us, we produced a product that more fully addressed our

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customer’s needs and requirements. It was a better product—more capable and user-oriented—than we would have produced without the active participation of the customer’s engineers, operators, and maintainers. And, in the end, we had a well-informed, well-educated customer expert in our system’s uses and capabilities.

Overall, the results from “getting in bed” with the customer were nothing like I had been taught they would be. Nothing but good came from the effort, and both customer and supplier benefited—the ultimate win/win situation.

