

Role, Schmole

A position paper for the Customer workshop, OOPSLA 2004

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Here's a summary of 3394 recent mailing list threads:

*Skeptic: How can one person *possibly* do everything expected of the XP Customer!?*

Ron Jeffries: The XP Customer isn't a person, it's a Role.¹

By that, he means that the Customer Role can be realized by a mix of people who work things out amongst themselves and then speak with One Voice. He's right. Let me say that again: He's right. But.

But doesn't it work ever so much better when it *is* a person? And when it's the right person?

My contribution to the workshop will be to ask us to pretend, for a short time, that we can require that every Agile project have a bona fide business expert sitting in the bullpen with the rest of the team. That person is the focal point of the programmers' work. They are oriented toward making her smile in the same way that a compass needle is oriented north: forces may sometimes push it away, but it *wants* to swing back.

The objection remains: that one person can't do it alone. So the first question is: what kind of **skills** is she likely to lack? Three related ones come immediately to my mind:

1. the skill of explaining herself well.
2. the skill of introspection, of realizing what part of her tacit knowledge has to be made explicit. (This is the skill of knowing what she's forgotten she knows.)
3. the skill of creating the telling example, that being one that both helps her explain what she wants and is also readily turned into an automated test.

It would be nice to have a more complete list. It'd also be nice if we collectively had some way of teaching those skills, other than stamping "Customer" on some poor accountant's head and tossing her into a writhing mass of programmers. (We might not teach those skills to the official Customer; we might instead surround her with the right support staff.)

Given skills, the next question is: what kind of **personality** turns programmers, especially, into compass needles? Here are some traits I think a Customer should have: an eagerness to help that leads her to immediately turn aside from her task when a programmer has a question; a respect for others' expertise; a touch of vulnerability; curiosity; patience; enthusiasm.

Perhaps companies could use a list of such traits to choose the most effective person to be Customer, not just the person with the most domain knowledge or the person who cares most about the product (or the person who's easiest to detach from her real job).

I hope we can talk about these things. Customers - the people sitting in chairs, not the Roles - need all the help we can give them.

¹ Rumor has it that F7 on his keyboard pastes that sentence into the current window.