

# ;login:

THE MAGAZINE OF USENIX & SAGE

July 2001 • Volume 26 • Number 4

inside:

GET MY GOAT

by Steve Johnson and Dusty White

**USENIX & SAGE**

The Advanced Computing Systems Association &  
The System Administrators Guild

# get my goat

## by Steve Johnson

Steve Johnson has been a technical manager on and off for nearly two decades. At AT&T, he's best known for writing Yacc, Lint, and the Portable Compiler.



yaccman@earthlink.net

## and Dusty White

Dusty White works as a management consultant in Silicon Valley, where she acts as a trainer, coach, and troubleshooter for technical companies.



dustywhite@earthlink.net

Organizations, in many ways, act like living creatures. The shared feelings and beliefs in a company, or even in a department of a company, can sometimes take on a life of their own. Biologists describe something as alive if it has recognizable boundaries and takes active steps to preserve the integrity of those boundaries. In this and the next couple of articles, we will discuss how this works with organizations.

If a living thing picks up something it can't ingest (say, a splinter), the first response is typically to isolate it first (for example, grow a protective layer of tissue around the splinter) and then expel it. In the case where we eat food that is tainted, the first step is skipped – we just get rid of what we can't digest, sometimes violently.

Organizations are pressured to digest people, ideas, and technology. Sometimes they cannot. So organizations act very much like other living things: they isolate, and then expel, what they cannot integrate. At its best, this is a very natural response that keeps the organization healthy. At its worst, it is a prelude to death throes.

We believe that these patterns of behavior are very deeply ingrained in us. They are not necessarily irrational, but they are certainly a-rational. They take place below the level of rational thought. As a result, symbolism, so beloved by the unconscious mind, is often employed by an organization's "immune system."

One very clear way to see this is the phenomenon of scapegoats. The term comes from the Old Testament Jews, who, once a year, would have a ceremony where the sins of the entire tribe were symbolically transferred to a goat, who was then driven out into the desert to die. So this behavior is wired into our traditions for several millennia.

Nearly everyone who has worked at a company for a few years has seen scapegoats. A project fails, money or business is lost, there is a period of confusion. Then somebody (typically two managerial levels below the real source of the problem) is identified as the cause of the debacle. Depending on the company culture, the person may be publicly humiliated, be forced to resign, be fired, or spend several years "in the penalty box" where they are given postings to Siberia, or put in charge of preparing the budget. Managers are often defrocked or their organization is gutted. Technical people are more likely to be let go, or promoted to high-sounding but meaningless titles ("Corporate Technology Guru") and ignored.

When this happens, the majority of partly guilty people can relax – their sins have been forgiven, handed to the scapegoat, and they can get on with running the organization. This is actually healthier for the organization than recriminatory wallowing in its failures, so organizations that have a well-developed immune response tend to succeed over the long run. Large, successful companies often have carried scapegoating to a high art form. Sometimes it is the scapegoat's personality that causes the problems. Sometimes it is poor business or technical judgment. Often, the most virulent and irrational scapegoating involves ideas.

Say a new employee, call him Smarty, arrives and quickly starts saying loudly to everyone in sight that the current project should be scrapped and rewritten in Java. The immediate effect of these pronouncements is to make the current staff, all C++ experts, feel stupid. Nobody likes to feel stupid. Moreover, Smarty is criticizing the plans of the organization, increasing the stress level of both managers and programmers. In effect, the organization begins to run a fever. Sometimes, the new idea infects a few people and spreads through the organization. (Depending on the idea, this may be a good or bad thing!)

## Bearing the sins of an entire organization is hard work.

But sometimes the idea is too uncomfortable. The organization will isolate it and then reject it. A key manager makes a couple of suggestive comments, and those in the know realize that Smarty's days are numbered. People stop wanting to sit next to him at lunch. Key pieces of information just don't seem to make it to Smarty's desk. He gets more and more uncomfortable and may not even realize why. Eventually, if he doesn't get so uncomfortable he leaves, he will be transferred or fired. Then the organization will heave a collective sigh of relief (ignorance being bliss, after all). The stress level goes down, and the organization actually functions better (albeit they may still be doing the wrong thing).

If Smarty is a manager, the projects he championed may be cancelled. In one case we know of, the manager left, and the project he had protected against great opposition was almost immediately canned. Three months later, it was resurrected under another name. A year after that, it was the biggest income producer for the department. When the original manager pushed the project, the organization couldn't "digest" it. After the sins were laid on this manager and he left, the "infection" left with him. That allowed the organization to see the positive things about the project, and find a way to digest it, under a different name.

You say, is this fair? Of course not. Bearing the sins of an entire organization is hard work. Scapegoats are rarely happy people and may even develop serious health problems from carrying all those sins that aren't theirs. Perhaps they can gain some solace by thinking that some people who died to save others from their sins are pretty fondly remembered by various religions. Fair or not, it does seem to be inevitable, wired into our culture if not our neurology.

Clearly, it is best not to become a scapegoat. If you encounter resistance to your ideas or your style, be aware of your effect on other people. Watch particularly for any sign that people are feeling put down or inferior to you, because this generates strong negative energy in most people.

Sometimes, however, you must push for what you believe is right, even if it gets you in organizational hot water. In one case we are aware of, an individual took a stand that he knew would get him scapegoated because he honestly believed that this was the best thing for the company (in which he held many stock options).

He indeed was scapegoated; the organization came together and, in fact, took the path he had espoused, and the company went on to become successful. He was, in effect, paid several million dollars to be a scapegoat (at least, that's how he sees it now). Considering how painful the experience was, he doesn't feel overpaid.

In a large company, a physical transfer to a new location is often the best way to recover from scapegoating. (One scapegoat I know took a posting to Japan. When someone asked his boss why he was sent to Japan, a co-worker quipped, "We don't have an office on the moon yet.") He returned in triumph several years later – the beliefs that had got him exiled had finally won the day in his old organization, and his recent successes in Japan had given people more respect for him. He was out of the penalty box.

For many people, however, the best thing to do is to learn what you can from the experience of being scapegoated, and then leave. Pick your next company wisely. Watch the effect you have on others. Make sure you have some allies – peers and managers – before trying to make big changes in the organization. And when scapegoats are created (and they will be), show some compassion. It could easily have been you.