

For As Long As Memory Serves

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Abstract: *Agile processes are easy to grasp after you've been on a project that employs them. Until then, many have trouble understanding what an agile process or an agile project is all about. Whereas traditional project management approaches can offer analogies to traditional, production-line manufacturing, agile processes often use analogies to complexity theory, a slippery subject in its own right. For instance, who can offer a twenty-five word description of "emergence" that doesn't leave people gape-mouthed. This paper is one of the author's attempts to create a wider body of home-spun analogies for agile processes for software development.*

Overview: For as long as memory serves, geese and other migratory birds travel to warm climes when winter comes, and return to their homes in springtime. Employing many techniques recently modeled by complexity theory, such as self-organization and emergence, these geese have a record of success envied by the Boston RedSox. What would happen, though, if Frederick Taylor got to a gaggle of geese and taught them a more prescriptive method of migrating? This article briefly explores the results.

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Article: For as long as memory serves, a gaggle of geese had migrated every winter from a certain place in northern Alberta to San Fillipe in Mexico. For the last several years, the gaggle had been led by Mildred. Relying on instinct, keen senses and tradition, the migration had never failed, although in recent years there had been more than the usual number of complications. Feeding along the last part of the journey had been disrupted by the divergence of the Colorado River. Global warming had confused the geese. And new weather patterns made parts of their journey faster and other parts slower than usual.

In August, 2000, Mildred received a flyer from the Project Management Institute extolling the virtues of planning amid turbulent times. Mildred attended a seminar, followed by several in-depth courses, providing her with the ability to truly plan the next migration. Equipped with a new laptop PC and Microsoft Project, Mildred returned to the gaggle to make this year's migration more predictable. Using the latest meteorological data, relying on memories of past migrations, and receiving the council of other geese, Mildred pulled together a detailed plan that the gaggle would follow this year. No more guess work! The gaggle would leave on November 2 and be in San Fillipe for Christmas Eve. All of the distances, nightly stops, and even assignments in the V had been planned.

On November 2, Mildred and the gaggle awoke to begin their migration. Mildred had been up all the night before, checking and double-checking the plan, ensuring that all the assignments were understood. A bit more tired than she had hoped, Mildred nevertheless took the lead position in the V, as planned, and led the gaggle South for the winter.

Mildred's head of the V assignment was for 2.5 hours, with an assigned ground speed of 10.6 knots. Due to tiredness, Mildred was only able to achieve an average of 9.6 knots and had fagged out within 1.8 hours. However, a plan is a plan, and Mildred continued at the lead for the full 2.5 hours at a rapidly declining speed. When Mildred gave over the head of the V to Nance, the average for her 2.5 hours was only 8 knots, and the ground covered was only 20 miles. This did not bode well, for their planned stop that night would now require more time. Complicating matters further, a nasty headwind picked up.

At 9:30, an exhausted gaggle of geese descended to a pond on farmer John's ranch in northern Montana. Mildred was deeply concerned. Although they had made their destination by extending their day four hours, what did this portend for the remainder of the journey? Much as she didn't want to acknowledge it, Mildred was going to have to stay up reworking the plan that night.

Nancy and George, Mildred's current wingmates, sensed that something was wrong at farmer John's. Their intuition told them that this wasn't the same place as in previous years. They communicated this to Mildred. Already burdened with today's shortcomings and the expectation of a long night, Mildred didn't want to hear their instincts. She drove the gaggle on to the pond. Oh, if only she had known that farmer John had turned the pond into farmer John's hunt club!! Three of the gaggle were lost before the gaggle got below 100 feet. Huddled in the rushes, Mildred counted beaks and found that more than half had been lost or were too wounded to continue.

Mildred would have been at a loss but for her training in planning. She drew on her knowledge, pulled out the laptop, and began to prepare a change order which would lead to a modification of the gaggle's pert chart.. Unfortunately, before Windows came up the rest of the geese had taken matters into their own hands and terminated Mildred's future.

System development projects are more complex than Mildred's migration. Mildred dealt with physical realities. We deal with logical, intangible concepts that are progressively detailed until computers are controlled by our programs. We are haunted by complexities in three dimensions:

1. Requirements
2. Technology
3. People

Agile processes provide systems development projects with the same tools that geese rely on (before Mildred's ill-fated venture) during migration. Frequent inspection of progress, self-organization and adaptation to what is found, emergence of progress based on the adaptations, and collaboration to determine the best course of action.