



# Agile Record

The Magazine for Agile Developers and Agile Testers



# Be the Worst

by Dawn Cannan  
(with a commentary by Lisa Crispin)

What was that? Did I just say "Be the worst"? I sure did. But before you go telling your boss that I told you to be the worst professional you can be, let me finish the phrase!

I first heard this phrase from Chris McMahon, who got it from the old saying in music jazz legend Pat Metheny said, "...try to be the worst guy in whatever band you're in. That's the secret." (<http://hepcat1950.com/pmivmix1.html>) Given the context, what I am saying is **"be the worst of the people you are surrounded by"**, or **"surround yourself with really great people."**

I think back to an early job in my career, straight out of college. At this place, I remember thinking to myself with some frequency, "These people are **SO SMART!** I feel **SO DUMB** when I am around them!" I often tried to just keep up with conversation, hoping to fake it long enough to avoid appearing dumb, too. Looking back, how I wish I could have gotten over my own insecurity and taken the opportunity for exactly the opportunity it was. What I should have been thinking was "Wow, these people are **SO SMART!** I want to learn everything I can from them!"

What can we get out of "being the worst", and why would anyone suggest that?

## Be a student

Here are just a few potential outcomes of "being the worst": learning, experience, and growth. Working every day with people who have skill sets or qualities you aspire to attain, you can see first hand, under a variety of situations how they embody these skills or qualities. By allowing yourself to be a student, you open yourself up to learn new techniques, experience a variety of situations, and feel more confident that you can handle any situation that may come your way. As a result, you are likely to acquire new technical skills, as well as "soft skills" such as better ways to communicate.

Obviously, we can't just group together the people we think em-

body all of the qualities we wish we were better at, put them on a team, and work with them. Most of the time, we work with a mixed bag of people with a mixed bag of skills and experience. So what can we do to be sure we are surrounding ourselves with learning experiences? First and foremost, looking at learning in this way requires both humility and an open mind. Start by understanding this, and be okay with the fact that you have a lot to learn. It is okay to not know everything. It is okay to ask someone else for their opinion, if you're willing to honestly listen to what they have to say. You can decide for yourself which techniques to incorporate into your tool belt, but you have to listen with an open mind. Once you make the choice that it's okay to not have all of the answers, you will find that you ask lots of questions. It's okay to ask lots of questions!

## Connect with experts

One way to surround yourself with people you want to learn from is to become more active in the software development or agile community. Conferences are a great way to meet people, talk about issues you have encountered, and work through problems. Some popular conferences are even free, such as CITCON (<http://citconf.com/>) and SDT Conference (<http://www.sdtconf.com/>). For me, conferences offer a place to talk to people who have experience in specific areas that I am struggling with. In this context, I can have a discussion about the details of my specific situation. I had an experience like this at Agile 2009 last August. I had been struggling for weeks with automating a test around a specific custom component. At the conference, I heard someone else talking about the same component, so I asked him if he had been able to tackle test automation against it. We sat down at my computer together and I found out that he knew how to solve my issue! Not only that, but he shared that solution and several others with me.

Meetup.com exposes local groups you can join to meet with people face to face. Try searching that site for general words like software, testing, or agile. Even if they are a moderate drive away,



many groups only meet once a month. A few months ago, I moved to the Raleigh, NC area. Before I moved, I had found a couple of software groups on Meetup.com, and joined them. The local Agile RTP group had a meeting scheduled during my first week in town, and I decided to go. I was excited to meet so many people interested in the same things, and before I knew it, a few weeks later I was road tripping with several of them to go to AgilePalooza in Charlotte! I didn't even know AgilePalooza was happening until I was invited to go. In just a few short months, I have made some very strong professional connections through this group.

Many online groups (like Yahoo! Groups or Google groups) focus on specific development subjects, such as Scrum, Agile Testing, or even specific programming languages like Java. Social networking is a great way to get yourself connected to people. For example, I frequently use Twitter to reach out to people when I have a specific question or am stuck on a specific problem. My Twitter contacts include people that I consider experts in everything from software testing to software development to management and process strategies. Many times, I can ask a question on Twitter and have an answer within minutes.

Another way to tackle the desire to always be learning is to pick a specific focus area. Perhaps there is someone in your company with a specific skill set that you would like to be better at yourself. Maybe you admire someone's leadership style, and you're trying to improve your own. This may be a relationship you can foster. Ask your model leader to have lunch with you, and ask her about her influences, about how she comes to certain decisions, or about what books she has read. If you're not so bold, you can be much more subtle. Just watch how she handles things, and notice patterns in her responses. Check out the books on her desk, those are likely ones she has read and/or are her favorites. If you read a few of the same books, then you have a few topics to bring up with her in hallway conversation.

### Immerse yourself

Speaking of books, they can be another great source for "surrounding ourselves" with people to learn from, even if it's not direct contact. Many of the people we consider experts have gotten their influences from the same root sources. In listening to who their major influences are, you can begin to learn directly from that source as well. I have found that the most influential people have written books, kept blogs, and have published many, many articles. I have a rule of thumb: if I hear about a certain book or person (or concept!) three times, it's time for me to look into it myself. If you listen closely to people you look up to, you'll hear who they are quoting, and from what sources.

Recently, this strategy has led me to Jerry Weinberg. One of my mentors told me that she considered herself a disciple of Jerry Weinberg for all of the "human stuff" involved in team building and coaching. I've always been known as a fairly blunt person, and can sometimes be so blunt that my message gets lost in the delivery. I've learned that many of the people I want to learn from look to him for ideas and inspiration in this area. Since I haven't quite figured out how to get him into my workplace, I've

begun reading his books and his articles, completely immersing myself in them. In this way, I am surrounding myself with someone I want to learn from. I started out with "An Introduction to General Systems Thinking." Amazingly, the more I got into the original topic that I was exploring, I found many other things that I could learn from him. Through that investigation, I found his book on writing: "Weinberg on Writing: The Fieldstone Method." That book has inspired me to begin writing more seriously, and here I am, writing an article!

So look around for the people near you who are experts in areas where you are not. After that, look for groups and meetings you can join. People in such groups are self selected and will likely be experts in something you can learn. Beyond that, social networking outlets like mail lists and Twitter provide access to an amazing amount of expertise. Everyone you meet through these channels will have their own favorite sources for expert information. So go ahead, surround yourself with experts and allow yourself to grow through their expertise. Eventually you will become the expert for another student!

Be the worst. ■

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## Best Worst Experiences

*a commentary by Lisa Crispin*

Hearing this "be the worst" idea from Dawn was a big "aha moment" for me! I realize I've done this unconsciously many times in my career. I also realize the times I was the "worst" were the ones that worked out the best!

### Being the Worst Speaker

Back in the late 90s, I wanted to attend testing conferences because I always got so many new ideas and inspiration from them, but neither I nor my employer could afford them. I decided to try my hand at presenting, just so I could get to the conferences.

One of the first big conferences where I presented was Quality Week Europe 2000. The other presenters at this conference were awesome, and several remain some of my favorites today. I was by far the least experienced speaker. I was so nervous about my "keynote" that I raced through it at warp speed. I'm sure I talked so fast nobody understood a word. My talk was on testing in Extreme Programming teams, and most of the audience never heard of XP. The audience was too big to allow for questions during the presentation, and without that feedback, I was lost. I finished a 45-minute talk in 30 minutes, and was mortified.

The next speaker was Hans Buwalda, who combines humor, clear explanations, good organization and technical expertise into accessible and enjoyable presentations. As I finished my rushed presentation, he made me feel better by joking that he really needed the extra time and I had made it possible. Later, he generously spent a few minutes with me and offered advice to improve my presenting skills.

I don't remember the specific words of advice Hans gave me (and neither does he), but I do remember that I was able to do a much better job at subsequent conferences. I watch other speakers to pick up pointers, read how-to articles by good speakers, ask experienced presenters to review my slides, avoid non-interactive sessions, and I've gradually improved. I'll never be a Hans Buwalda, but I can impart useful information without putting everyone to sleep.

### Being the Worst Technically

I once started a new job where for the first time, I worked on a team coding in .Net instead of Java. I was suddenly plunged into the Microsoft world. In addition, this was a new domain, a much larger company than I'd ever worked for, and the first time I was telecommuting.

Fortunately, I was the worst person on the team on almost all the technology being used. We used FitNesse, which I do know, and the SWAT GUI test driver, which I didn't. I had experience with Subversion, but definitely not with Visual Studio. I've got a lot of experience with test automation, but the code design expertise of everyone else on the team far exceeded mine. I've used lots of defect tracking tools and online planning boards, but never JIRA and GreenHopper.

It was wonderful! At all times, I had someone pairing with me to help me learn SWAT, learn the domain, or design an automated test. My teammates thought of brilliant ways we could stay in constant touch with several communication channels. When we got bogged down or confused, someone always had a great experiment to try. I don't think I've ever worked with a more innovative team, or learned so much in the space of three months!

For me, agile is all about learning. For every skill I master, there's a new one to start learning. When you combine "being the worst" with a good learning culture, you can overcome every obstacle, and embrace the agile value of enjoyment. ■

### > About the author



#### **Dawn Cannan**

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