

# Corncob

- **AntiPattern Name:** Corncob
- **Also Known As:** Corporate Shark, Loose Cannon, Third-World Information Systems Troubles (TWIT)
- **Most Frequent Scale:** Enterprise
- **Refactored Solution Name:** Corncob Removal Service
- **Refactored Solution Type:** Role
- **Root Causes:** Avarice, Pride, Narrow-Mindedness
- **Unbalanced Forces:** Management of Resources, Technology Transfer
- **Anecdotal Evidence:** "Why is Bill so difficult to work with?" "Management always listens to whomever shouts longest and loudest." "I own development and I have made a decision that you will follow." "We need to change the build process and accept that we will delay delivery a month or two."

## Background

Corncobs are difficult people who can be prevalent in the software development business. This attitude can be due to aspects of individual personality, but often, difficulties arise from personal motivations for recognition or monetary incentives.

Due to rigorous schedules and budget pressure, software development can become stressful. Corncobs exacerbate these problems and create unnecessary, additional stress, in what may be an already overstressed environment.

"Corncob" is a slang term frequently used at Object Management Group, a software consortium, to describe difficult people.

## General Form

A difficult person (the Corncob) causes problems through destructive behaviors for a software development team or, even worse, throughout an enterprise. This person may be a member of the team or a member of external senior staff (such as a technical architect or development manager) who adversely impacts the team through various means: technical, political, and personal.

When dealing with Corncobs, it's important to remember that politics is the exercise of power, and Corncobs focus much more on politics than technology. They are usually experts at manipulating politics at personal and/or organizational levels. Technology-focused people can become unwilling easy victims of the Corncob's tactics.

## Symptoms And Consequences

- A development team or project is unable to make progress because someone disagrees with their key objectives or essential processes and continually tries to change them.
- One person continually raises objections, under the guise of concern, which are intractable: performance, reliability, technology market share, and so on.
- The destructive behavior is well known to many people in the enterprise, but it's tolerated and supported (in some way) by management because they are unaware of, or unwilling to address, the damage it causes.
- Political forces create an environment where it's difficult to keep technical discussions on track.
- Political forces result in frequent changes to the scope or requirements of the system. The project becomes much more reactive than proactive, because everyone is responding to the "endless improvements" from the Corncob.
- Often, the destructive person is a manager who is not under the direct authority of a senior software development manager or project manager.
- The company has no defined decision-making process that enables it to resolve issues and move on. This allows a manager to inappropriately interfere beyond his or her area of accountability.

## Typical Causes

Management supports the Corncob's destructive behavior, by virtue of not acknowledging the impact of the Corncob's actions. Management's view of the situation is often supplied from the Corncob.

- The Corncob has a hidden agenda, which conflicts with the team's goals.
- There is a fundamental disagreement between team members that no amount of communication can resolve.
- Management doesn't isolate the group from internal and external forces, and has inappropriately allocated roles to staff, who abuse them for their own ends; even worse, management has failed to allocate accountability at all.

## Known Exceptions

The Corncob AntiPattern is acceptable when a company or product development manager is willing to live with the actions of the Corncob. This is a subjective judgment of benefits and disadvantages.

In projects that involve multiple organizations, it's sometimes useful to have a designated Corncob, whose role is to defend an existing architecture from inappropriate changes. When there are many conflicting technical viewpoints, a dominant personality is often required to enforce the reference architecture.

## Refactored Solution

Solutions to the Corncob AntiPattern are applied at several levels of authority, including strategic, operational, and tactical. In all cases, the key action lever is management support for the destructive behaviors. By eliminating management support at the aforementioned levels, the Corncob loses support, and the best interests of the software development team can dominate.

## Tactical Solutions

Tactical solutions are actions employed on the fly, such as in a meeting. They include the following:

- *Transfer the responsibility.* Give the naysayer full responsibility for solving the problems they identify within an agreed-on time period. In other words, turn the responsibility for planning and resolution over to the person who raises the concerns.
- *Isolate the issue.* Often, the Corncob's is an isolated opinion. Appealing to the group's interests is an effective way to defend against an individual's behavior or isolated concerns. If the Corncob is confrontational, remember to never take anything personally; doing so is always a mistake. Facilitate the group to discuss and frame the key objections, then try to gain consensus to overrule the objector. A straw poll is an effective technique for revealing group feeling.
- *Question the question.* When the Corncob uses ambiguous or "loaded" words or phrases, ask him or her to clarify their meaning. When he or she uses hearsay evidence to make an assertion, ask him or her to substantiate the claims and to identify his or her personal position.

## Operational Solutions

Operational actions are taken offline, within a limited organizational scope. These include:

- *Corrective interview.* Management meets individually with the person causing the problems, and explains the impact of his or her behavior. The purpose of the corrective interview is to raise awareness and reach agreement on how to change the behavior.
- *Friendly outplacement.* Recommend a Corncob to employment headhunters to help him or her to exit gracefully a difficult situation in an organization.

## Strategic Solutions

Strategic actions are long term and have a wider enterprise scope, such as:

- *Corncob support group.* If there are several Corncobs in an organization, management can transfer them into the same group. In this way, they have to contend with each

other's personalities and behaviors. Often, each will approach management and ask why he or she has to work with such difficult people, giving the manager the opening to explain that the person is him- or herself described as difficult by others. This can result in self-awareness, and perhaps, improvement.

- *Empty department.* Managers who are themselves difficult can be transferred to departments in which they are the only employee. These managers usually "get the message" and retire or pursue careers in other companies.
- *Reduction in force.* Sometimes there is no other recourse than to eliminate difficult people from the project team or environment.

## Variations

Variations on the preceding solutions include:

- *Sidelining.* Sidelining entails reassigning the Corncob to minimal duties. That said, we have found sidelining to be an ineffective practice, as it gives the Corncob more time to think and lobby his or her (often hidden) agenda.
- *Third-World Information System Troubles (TWIT).* This term was introduced by Randall Oakes, MD, to refer to naysayers who resist IT change, even though the majority of people are experiencing negative consequences under current conditions. The TWIT benefits in some way from the status quo. As Dr. Oakes points out, helping the person manage his or her stress levels can lead to trust, friendship, and more open-mindedness.
- *Corporate Shark.* A Corporate Shark is an experienced manager whose career consists of managing relationships rather than his or her technical expertise, which may, as a result, be long neglected. Sharks survive by who they know not what they know. The Corporate Shark knows how to "work the system," and can easily create difficult political situations for those focused on technical issues. In the working world, everybody needs a friend. The best friend is the influential person in the company who defends you to the hilt when confronted by attacks from Corporate Sharks. The best way to manage a relationship with Corporate Sharks is to avoid them altogether, because the only likely outcomes are negative.
- *Bonus Monster.* Someone stands to reap a short-term gain (such as an executive bonus) by cutting corners in the software development process. Bonus monsters are

particularly destructive by encouraging internal competition between different departments within an enterprise. The problem is remedied by restructuring or eliminating the bonus system. A Bonus Monster is usually also a Corporate Shark, but a shark with strong motivation to push for bonus-generating outcomes.

- *Firebrand*. A Firebrand is a person who deliberately creates a political emergency. For example, the Firebrand might be responsible for the late delivery of a critical piece of software by generating various misdirections and obstructions. His or her purpose is to create an emergency so that later he or she can be recognized as a hero for saving the organization. In order to achieve success, the firebrand extinguishes the fire; that is, he or she removes all the obstructions and readjusts the focus of the developers, as needed, to allow them to succeed.
- *Egomaniac*. An Egomaniac is obsessed with his or her image as a key influencer or dominant figure. Egomaniacs are also called Prima Donnas. A remedy for senior managers who are Egomaniacs is to transfer them to an empty department. In meetings, Egomaniacs can be managed by publicly recognizing their expertise and importance. However, this sometimes backfires by encouraging their narcissist tendencies.
- *Loose Cannon*. Certain people are consistently difficult to deal with due to their extrovert behavior. Their actions can have destructive effects on the project's image and morale; for example, indiscrete disclosures of information and insensitivity to important organizational relationships. Loose Cannons are easy to detect; during group situations, they quickly make their presence known. The most effective way to deal with Loose Cannons is to alert management, who should conduct a corrective interview.
- *Technology Bigot*. A Technology Bigot is a Loose Cannon who promulgates marketing hype and refuses to consider other viewpoints; for example, people who insist that all information technology will become Microsoft-based, or that CORBA is the only true way to implement distributed objects.
- *Territorial Corncob*. Individuals who attempt to protect organizational or technical turf often exhibit defensive behaviors. They need to defend their territory as a way of quieting underlying insecurities about their competence. Territorial Corncobs often can be placated with flattery and sensitivity to their weaknesses. Avoid appealing to their greed; Territorial Corncobs are particularly difficult to discourage once they sense the potential for new opportunities or power within the scope of their territory.

- *Corncobs out of the Woodwork.* When a particularly difficult or stressful situation arises such as serious project problems or impending layoffs, some Corncobs amplify their behavior. In the case of layoffs, if you are a competent person who can obtain another job, consider volunteering for layoff so that others can retain their jobs and salaries that they may desperately need.
- *Saboteur.* A Saboteur is someone about to exit the group who begins to manipulate the work environment in favor of their next assignment. For example, Saboteurs often try to make colleagues leave the project through active recruiting, rumors, and negative behaviors. This is a particularly difficult situation to detect and remedy because the Saboteur often conceals his or her intention to depart. One large computer manufacturer gave frequent after-hours parties—complete with large quantities of liquor—at which it encouraged its employees to discuss outside career plans. The Saboteur usually has one or more confidants who know of their plans. Once a Saboteur is discovered, he or she should be precluded from impacting the work environment.
- *Careerist.* This is a variation of the Saboteur, a person who influences a technical choice that widens his or her personal expertise and job marketability. For example, a technical architect may choose to use an object database for object persistence, even though an RDBMS with an object API is a more appropriate technical solution.
- *Anachronist.* This is a Corncob who resists innovation simply because he or she doesn't understand it. The Anachronist may be quite knowledgeable about legacy technologies, and resists new technologies arbitrarily. Education of the anachronist is often an effective solution.

## Examples

One of the Corporate Sharks that we encountered years ago was recently transferred to a one-person department and then laid off because the consequences of his personality traits outweighed his benefits to the corporation. In our experience, Corncobs eventually self-destruct and leave the organization. The downside to this is that they sometimes come back.

A friend of ours underwent a dramatic personality change (for the better) when he withdrew from participation in a corporate bonus system. While under the bonus system, our friend engaged in a number of confrontational interventions in various software processes due to his desire for short-term outcomes (executive bonuses).

Territorial Corncobs can be the most abrasive variation. In particular, if a person or group of people believe they "own" a particular buzzword, such as "architecture," they may attempt to vigorously suppress anyone who uses it. E-mail is a particularly effective weapon of the Territorial Corncob because it produces tangible evidence.

E-mail is also an easily manipulated medium for engaging in emotional confrontations and flaming.

### **Related Solutions**

The technology bigot variation of this AntiPattern is also a form of the Golden Hammer AntiPattern. See the Golden Hammer AntiPattern for a related solution.

### **Applicability To Other Viewpoints And Scales**

The impact of Corncobs on architecture and development is usually to slow down progress. Confrontational issues raised by Corncobs tend to decrease the sophistication of the discussion and to instead focus on specific forces.

In some sense, Corncob behaviors reverse the intended benefits of design patterns. Instead of making the software process more sophisticated and efficient, Corncobs make it less sophisticated and less efficient.

Instead of making the process more balanced, by taking into consideration all of the significant forces, the Corncob tends to bias the discussion and decision making toward selected forces, which may not be the most significant.