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The Sunny Actuary, Or Humor in the Workplace Is Productive

By Tony Batory

When I was assigned to the System Operations area, the Actuarial Pricing Unit and system programmers were not working well together. That's an understatement: They hated each other.

Some of this was caused by the business environment. The actuaries would get requirements from the states or the feds and would go to the programmers with: *"We need this rate change programmed in the next two months or the state is going to fine us or pull our license."*

The programmers would respond:

"There's no project plan. You haven't really identified what the requirement is or what systems are affected."

"There's no test plan."

"All resources for the next two months are dedicated to projects that you already identified as high priority."

Then the actuaries would reply with *"This change is higher priority,"* which does not resolve any of the above.

I had some negotiating experience in National Accounts but I was still unprepared for this

management challenge. Initially I struggled with the fact that the programmers I was working with were on the other side of the planet. I would call them and only get their voicemail; of course, the local time was 2 a.m. They would return my call but only get my voicemail; of course, the local time was 3 a.m.

And I had problems with 14-letter first names and last names that I had trouble pronouncing and remembering. I began to refer to Sakthivial as "Sak" and to Kumarasotaguru as "Kumy." I never thought this was any kind of ethnic slur; I just don't like long names. I don't even like Anthony. And I told them specifically: *"Do not refer to me as Anthony. I use that as a spam filter."*

But the name that really got me was Sunnitaya. She was a programmer from Thailand who was working in our office. She already had a nickname, "Nek." Nek? When I asked around, no one knew what Nek meant.

That's how bad the social environment was. No one would even ask what your name meant or how to spell it. A monthly face-to-face status meeting was late getting started and I was sitting next to Nek. So I asked her, *"Where does Nek come from?"*



It doesn't appear to be a shortened form of Sunnitaya."

She laughed and said, *"Nek has nothing to do with Sunnitaya. In Thai, it literally means 'little one' or the youngest in the family."*

I replied, *"Youngest in the family? I'm the youngest in MY family. So that makes me Nek, too."* We both laughed, and like R2-D2 began to refer to each other that way when the meeting started.

Nek2 will supply the detailed programming requirements. Nek1 will modify the code. Nek2 will execute the test plan and file any defects. Nek1 will clear the defects. Nek2 will then sign off on the entire project. Nek1 will then move the changes to production.

The other people at the meeting looked at us like we were nuts.

The business environment hit me the very next day with a nasty new requirement. Our rate formula was simply a string of factors: area, expense, industry, trend, age and a few others. A few states required us to combine some factors into a sub-product called the rating band. The rating band would be subject to a minimum and maximum and then reinserted into the formula. Different states had different combinations of factors in their rate bands. The new requirement was to rate age inside the band. This was difficult because age is at the end of the calculation

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and there could be multiple age factors.

I met with Nek, explained the above, and asked for her help. She smiled and said, “The code is easily changed.”

“That’s great, I’ll file a project request and test plan right away,” I said.

Nek replied, “Getting capital approval and scheduling could take months. Let’s just add it to the existing project.”

“But wouldn’t that need a change control and have to be approved by the project manager?” I asked.

“You actuaries,” Nek joked. “Ninety percent of the time, nobody knows what the heck you’re talking about. We can tack this

onto the existing requirements document; no one will know the difference.”

The change was successfully deployed in record time. I was so relieved that I wrote her this love song. I told her “Nek” wasn’t a good nickname—it’s harsh, unfriendly and clumsy. But Sunnitaya shortens to Sunny. Warm and friendly.

The office grapevine passed the story around and up the management chain of command. No, there was never any serious relationship. But it improved the working relationship between the actuarial area and the programming staff. Humor has real productive impact.

Oh, Sunny,
Yesterday the states gave me a pain.
But, Sunny,
You smiled and said the code was easily changed.
Now the testing is done and deployment is here.
The defects we’ve filed are clear, clear, clear.
Oh, Sunny,
My programmer true, I love you.
Oh, Sunny,
Thank you for the time that you spent with me.
Oh, Sunny,
Thank you for the tests from A to Z.
You gave me more than a helping hand,
Now we can rate **age inside the band.**
Oh, Sunny,
It’s so true, that I love you

You can access the soundtrack loaded under <https://soundcloud.com/tony-batory/sunny>.

P.S. If I ever put together a rock or jazz band made up of actuaries, I’d have to call it the **RATING BAND.** ■

Editor’s Note: You can find a variety of other anecdotes in Tony’s book, Actuarial Jokes, Memoirs and Other Minutiae, available at: <http://outskirtspress.com/webPage/isbn/9781478755128>.



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Leadership Inspiration Contest Winners!

The Leadership & Development Section (formerly the Management & Personal Development Section) would like to congratulate the winners of the recent Leadership Inspiration Contest!

Entrants were asked to tell us in 250 to 500 words what inspired them to be a better actuarial leader based around five different categories: an inspiring leadership quote, book/song, admirable leader/personal mentor, defining moment/event in their career, or any other leadership inspiration.

Thanks to all for participating and congratulations to the winners! Selected entries will be published in 2016 issues of *The Stepping Stone*.

Our winners are:

Best Overall Submission

\$250 Amazon gift card
Jeffrey Stock

Category Winners

\$50 Amazon gift card

Leadership Quote

Brian Hinkle

Book/Song

Tim Paris

Admirable Leader/

Personal Mentor

John Schumacher

Defining Moment/Event

Joanne Ryan

Other Leadership

Inspiration

Alan Gard

First Qualifying Submissions

(eight awarded due to eligibility)—\$25 Amazon gift card

Carlos Arocha, Juan Arroyo, Ed Bonach, Stephanie Calandro, Mary Pat Campbell, Gregory Fann, Tamar Miller and Fraser Smart