QA Consultants

Raising testing profile

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If Rodney Dangerfield was a tester he would claim he didn't get enough respect – and he would be right in many instances. Traditionally, the software testing function often gets the short end of the stick when it comes to corporate priorities, funding and attention. Moreover, testers often get blamed for the bugs they find and the ensuing delays that come from the reports they pen. This (perceived) lack of status can have significant, negative repercussions by reducing tester engagement, creating internal strife and reducing vital collaboration. Long term, these issues can lead to lower quality code, ongoing work friction and slower time to value/market.

Fortunately, these outcomes are not predestined. QA departments and by extension testers can help their cause by raising their internal profile, clarifying their role & value and being more proactive with their goals & insights. The following five strategies can help accomplish this:

1. Link testing to corporate goals

Testing will never receive its due respect and focus if it does not link to key corporate priorities. QA managers need to explain the value of testing in terms of goals the organization recognizes, such as: improved customer satisfaction, reduced business risk and increasing brand image. Specifically, testing leaders need to ensure the testing metrics (create new ones if necessary) can be linked to corporate objectives and metrics. Once linked, they can be measured and managed – thereby raising priority.

2. Speak the right language to senior management

In many companies, there is a misunderstanding of the role and value of testing. Much of this confusion stems from the language used by each group. Executives usually talk in a language that focuses on strategic concerns like quality of products, risks, capabilities and financial performance. To this end, they tend to speak more about QA, which looks to build in quality and reduce cost across the entire company. As a result, they will view testing as a (tactical) part of QA. The typical testing manager, on the other hand, refers to testing within the framework of finding bugs and reporting them.

If testing managers want a higher profile they should talk about their activities within a strategic, financial and organizational context. Firstly, testers need to communicate the value testing and QA generates in order to building mutual understanding and alignment. Executives need to understand

how testing concerns translate into strategic business goals like customer satisfaction, performance and cost. Also, testers need to manage the expectations of senior management and users, and explain what is not testing. For example, testing is not a 100% stamp of approval; no software will ever be perfect.

3. Make a business case for more resources

Typically, testing departments suffer from inadequate resourcing and time to execute their tasks. This situation arises from some understandable reasons beyond the control of testing like coding problems, changing requirements or poor planning. It also happens because testing is a 'reactive' activity that gets the short end of a project budget because of where it occurs – late – in the software development lifecycle. Realistically, IT leaders will rarely be given "enough" resources unless they can generate a solid business case and ROI. To quantify the returns, testing managers must work with finance and other stakeholders to quantify the value of getting more resources & tools (e.g., improved quality, less rework, faster time to value) as well as determine the real costs.

4. Don't complain, help solve problems

Unfortunately, some testers perform their duties as if they have a chip on their shoulder. Examples of this behavior include excessive complaining about code quality (after the fact), a propensity to quickly lay blame on developers for problems and an over-zealous exercise of veto power over code releases. While many of their gripes are fair, they do little to actually improve a testers standing within the project, foster collaboration or enhance the overall QA process. Many testers need to be reminded that they 'attract more bees with honey than with vinegar'. As such, a more collaborative, forward-looking style should be standard operating procedure within the testing team.

5. Be proactive, repeat

To engender more respect and clarity around roles & value, the testing function should formalize and communicate its mandate as well as 'rules of engagement.' This clarified mandate should be communicated early and often, and up/down the organization as well as aligned with corporate goals, workflows and the firm's culture. The testing team should also be realistic around the organizational effort required to change perceptions. Sustained change takes time, requiring periodic, focused communication and proper behavior modeling for the testers.

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