



Magnus Ljadas is passionate about software development and he's one of the owners of Citerus. Please share your thoughts with him at: magnus.ljadas@citerus.se.

Interview with Johanna Rothman

Helping managers realize what they have to do; being one of the minds behind the annual Amplifying Your Effectiveness conference; co-host of the legendary Problem Solving Leadership workshop; chair of the Agile 2009 conference; blogger and podcaster; author of several books on project management, hiring, writing, and an upcoming book on project portfolios—Johanna Rothman is a source of inspiration to anyone who has the slightest interest in project work. This interview with Johanna Rothman was made by Magnus Ljadas.

Magnus: To what extent was becoming a project manager part of young Johanna Rothman's dreams and aspirations?

Johanna: I always knew I wanted a position of power, but when I was young, I thought that meant I had to be a doctor. When I got to university, I was a pre-med major for six weeks. That's when I realized the exams existed to weed out the people who were not going to make it through the grind of medical school—the exams had nothing to do with learning. I settled on Computer Science as a major and graduated. I remember being astonished at how much of the work was with people once I got to work.

I didn't really plan to be a project manager; it just seemed as if people needed organizing and I was the one to do it! Seriously, I've never been into command-and-control, but I have always looked for ways to remove obstacles from teams, make sure they all know the direction they need to travel in, and how they will know when they've arrived there. I hate Gantt charts and paperwork. But I love working with teams to help them accomplish what they need to deliver. I never planned to be a project manager. If you'd asked me this question early in my career, I would have said I wanted to run a business, to be a senior manager. For a long time, I thought that meant someone else's business. Now, it means mine.



Magnus: So power is important to you?

Johanna: Isn't it to most people?

Magnus: Imagine yourself in a less powerful situation, let's say in a developer's chair—on a project where developers are called “resources” rather than “human beings”. How would you react to that situation?

Johanna: The way I've reacted in past is to educate people one at a time. The first time a manager called people in my group FTEs (full time equivalents), I asked him what we were the equivalents of? The desk was an FTE. The chair was an FTE. Was I that kind of an FTE? I was 23 and it was not my first non-career-enhancing conversation. I've had many more since then. Managing salary outlay is important. But treating people as human beings is more important. That's because without people we can't get the work done. I happen to come to this from a logical perspective, but it doesn't matter if you come to it from a relationship perspective, or a problem-solving perspective, or a we-have-to-keep-the-organization-together perspective. Each perspective gets you to the same point: treat the people as human beings, give them challenging work, and they will deliver. When I think about power, there's titular power, the kind you get from your title or position in the organization or society. People give that to you. If you do enough bad things, they take the power away, even if you still have the title. If you do illegal things, the title goes too. So titular power is something that a lot of people look for, but few achieve. But the power I think about now (I have matured a little since I was a teenager :-)) is the kind that arises from within me. It comes from my integrity, from my willingness to try new things, from my pursuit of perfection in everything I do—not just work, but my relationships too. Anyone can achieve this kind of power. Because it comes from within, no one can take it away, except for yourself. And, no one can give it to you, except for yourself. The standards are much higher than titular power.

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Magnus: At what point did you become aware of this “power from within” and how did this awareness affect your thinking and actions?

Johanna: I was unaware of it but used it when I was in college. I was more aware of it once I became a project manager (about 26 or so), when one of my managers wanted me to do something I thought had no integrity. There was no way I was going to do it (essentially lie to a customer), and when I said so, he backed down. That's when I became consciously aware of my power.

Magnus: Consultants who speak and write make more money. Imagine you were immensely rich, would you still speak and write about project management?

Johanna: Yes. I have a passion about helping managers manage well. For me, that's about how you manage people, projects, and risk. Managers who don't manage well make everyone's lives miserable. They prevent people from learning, they keep death march projects, they don't decide what needs to be done and what doesn't need to be done. In general, they are a disaster. The good thing is we don't have a lot of terrible managers. But we have managers who are missing a piece of what they need to do. When they don't do that, such as know how to create a cross-functional team even if they are organized functionally, they hurt the project. When they think a Gantt chart is a true reflection of status, they hurt the project. When they don't build trusting relationships with their peers or staff or managers, they can't work effectively around the organization, so they hurt the project. I help managers realize what they have to do, so they move from—at best—not hurting their projects—to helping their projects.

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Magnus: What would be the necessary ingredients for a death march project in your opinion?

Johanna: A death march occurs under these conditions:

- > no one knows what done means
- > the developers have been kept separate from the testers
- > the developers don't know to look for feedback about their work
- > the project manager is focused on just the date
- > the project has no specific goal
- > the testers start the project late
- > the developers start the project late

I'm sure there are more. Waterfall, in and of itself, does not create a death march. But when the people on the project don't know where they're going and they get no feedback, that's when the conditions are ripe for a death march.

Magnus: Helping others to realize what they have to do sounds like a delicate job. What kind of skills does it take to get that job done?

Johanna: The first part is to help the manager see the data that's preventing the organization from moving forward. It's not just quantitative data, it's qualitative data too. The second part is explaining the consequences of that data. For example, I recently worked with a client whose developers didn't believe in continuous integration. When I showed them the data for the build times and the find-and-fix defect costs and told them what I'd expected the times and costs to be, the developers and managers were surprised, but willing to consider an alternative to what they were doing. I think of those skills as data gathering, and then influence/negotiation skills. Maybe a bit about presenting and articulating the issues too. The biggest skill however, is not deciding you know what's going on before you start.

Magnus: You co-host the legendary Problem Solving Leadership workshop together with Jerry Weinberg and Esther Derby. What do you like the most about Jerry and Esther?

Johanna: Every time I work with Jerry and Esther, it's a new experience. I like the surprises I get when I work with Jerry and Esther. One of the nice things about working with other people who practice experiential training is that if we see the workshop needs something different than we had planned, we can change it. Esther almost always has another idea about some way to present or debrief the material. Jerry has possibly tried something like what one of us is thinking, so we can ask about his experiences. I don't have to worry about the simulations or debriefs when I teach with Esther and Jerry. I might have to worry about timing, but I believe that's one of the reasons they asked me to co-teach.

Magnus: The PSL workshop is based on experiential training. You told me before that experiencing experiential training for the first time was a turning point for you. Why?

Johanna: I realized that people learned better and faster with experiential training. I certainly did, and everyone in my PSL did. I'd used experiential training before, without realizing what it was, but didn't realize how to highlight experiential training to make the simulations and experiences help people learn faster until I took PSL. Once I realized how to do that, I learned how to debrief differently. I now have a tool so I never teach a boring workshop. I don't give boring talks. Sure, there are people who aren't interested in my topic, which is fine. But the people who are interested, generally get a chance to try something. It's fun for me and the participants. It's changed how I run my training and speaking sessions.

Magnus: Every once in a while, when I go to a conference, I fall asleep. Other than keep people from dozing off, how much importance do you put in having fun?

Johanna: If people are falling asleep, it's because they're not connecting to the material. Why would I want to talk/teach/interact in a way that doesn't help people connect? I want to connect! And, if people are having fun while we connect, that's even better. Fun helps people learn, which is why it's impor-

tant. And, life is short. Why shouldn't we learn as much as possible and have as much fun as possible in our lives?

Magnus: I totally agree with you. Rumor has it that you are working on a new book. Would you like to comment on that?

Johanna: I'm working on the project portfolio book. When I work with clients, it doesn't matter what life-cycle they use—there are still people trying to work on multiple projects at the same time, or understaffed projects. The multitasking and understaffing arises because the managers don't make decisions about what to fund *now* vs. later. This book is about how to make those decisions. It is out for very early review, to make sure it hangs together. My job over the next couple of weeks is to "finish" it in the sense that it will be ready for a real review. In agile terms, you can think of this iteration as demo-able, and the next iteration as release-able, with the final iteration as actually done. It's funny to me—I've been doing this kind of work for a long time, and it isn't until I wrote it down that I realized how I made decisions.

Magnus: How important is speaking and writing for your own learning?

Johanna: Especially since I'm an extravert, speaking is critical. I don't know what I think until I say it. For those of you who are introverts, who do think before you speak, this probably sounds loony. But it is the way I think. I have to explore a subject by talking about it. That means when I write, I can start writing, but if I haven't fully explored the topic—or if I don't realize I haven't fully explored it—I need time to talk it through. Writing, on the other hand, allows me to solidify what I'm thinking in a way that other people can access. At least, I try to make my writing accessible! The discipline of writing forces me to find exactly the right words and phrases and stories to help people understand my ideas. I don't think I would be worth as much as I am to my clients without the writing and speaking. That way doesn't work for everyone, but it works for me.