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by Tina Darmohray

apropos

Call It Like It Is

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One of the things you learn to live with as a graduate of UC Berkeley are jokes about political activism and far-left, "out there" behavior. I didn't choose Berkeley for that reason, but my friends and family do note a buck-the-system streak in me. Recently, when my kids brought home a standardized test form, I guess that streak took over. On the section that asked about ethnicity, I bucked the system and created my own category. The choices were the familiar ones: Asian, African American, Native American, Hispanic, White (not of Hispanic descent), and so on. These choices bother me because they are not consistent. For example, I figure that if I'm "White" then the other choices need to be things like "Yellow, Red, Black, Beige" and so on. Or if someone else is "African American" or "Native American" then the rest of them should go something like "European American, Asian American" and so on. Or you can do the "oids": Caucasoid, Mongoloid, Negroid, etc. But you gotta be consistent, or it sends an additional message (a topic for another magazine, I'm sure). So I crossed out "White" and wrote "European American" then sent the form in to the unsuspecting teacher. She probably fixed it for me.

Accurate naming conventions are important. Agreed upon nomenclature goes at least half the distance in facilitating fruitful problem-solving discussions. When you don't share a common "language" for a topic, it's very hard to get to the root of the problem and devise a solution-oriented plan of action. That was the problem I faced in 199X as a hiring manager at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. LLNL did not have a system administrator job description. As such, whenever I hired a new system administrator, I had to figure out which non-fit description to place them in. Existing descriptions in our general field, were operator, computer programmer, and computer associate. In over-simplified terms these were folks who hung tapes, cut code, or provided administrative assistance by using computerized applications for a living. None of them were a good fit for a system administrator.

The problem with the lack of an appropriate job description for the system administrators manifested itself in many different ways. The most troublesome for me was at salary and review time. During the review meetings, system administrators would be compared with their "peers" in whatever category they'd been placed in. And, no matter what category that was, they were under-performing. For instance a system administrator may have performed some backups over the course of the year, but not nearly as many as the operators had. Similarly, they may have written some shell scripts to automate system administration, but that hardly compared the with the computer scientists, who created and maintained huge libraries of code. And so their performance in their category was poor, the review was subpar, and the resulting salary increase wasn't much. Over time. this snowballed into all kinds of personnel problems such as low esteem, low retention, and difficulty in hiring. I wanted a job description that used the right title, described the right qualifications, and measured the right skills; I wanted the right nomenclature for our profession!

It was natural that I became interested in SAGE and the SAGE Job Descriptions. I felt they were the ticket I was looking for to address my own hiring and assessment woes at LLNL. Note that the players wouldn't necessarily change, just the agreed-upon naming and description of them. Over the years I've heard from many HR groups that this (re)classification of their system administrators was very helpful. This underscores my belief that baseline nomenclature is key. We're not alone in this, as taxonomy is the underpinning of many scientific and technical efforts. It's clear that common language is basic to common goals.

We're currently considering updating the SAGE Job Descriptions to make them less

UNIX-centric – turns out making them more neutral is the easy part. Expanding them to embrace other prevalent OSes might be more difficult. The crux of the problem is that other OS system administrators have different titles for "our" skill-set categories and some of our titles mean entirely different things to them. Probably the best example of this is "Network Administrator," which seems to mean two quite different things to UNIX and NT/Netware system administrators. A fundamental question facing us in this update is, "Do we fit their jobs into our categories, or do we maintain separate categories?" There are good arguments for each approach. Part of me feels that describing entirely separate categories increases the divide which we're actually trying to bridge.

I welcome your thoughts on this topic.