

Cutting the Mustard – Lesson’s Learned in Striving to Become a Super Star Tester

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ABSTRACT

In my role as a tester, I strive to add value to my projects for my business stakeholders and end users. I work with my team to improve our project delivery, encourage continuous learning, and take part in project retrospectives to look for areas for improvement. Although I would love to be able to always make the improvements I see, I’ve realized that there are some things I cannot improve since they are external to me and I cannot always effect change.

There is something we do have control and the ability to change, ourselves. I have found that as I continually strive to become a superstar tester, I am continuously challenging myself to grow. This presentation will examine what it means to “Cut the Mustard” and will challenge attendees to cut the mustard in their own ways. By using the same continuous improvement skills we often focus externally, we can refocus that energy inwards on ourselves and redefine our own excellence. Leveraging our role in the industry of software testing and focusing first on ensuring quality within ourselves and all we do, we can effect positive change and transformation within the teams we work with.

1. What is Means to “Cut the Mustard”

No one knows why cutting the mustard was chosen as an example of high quality; however, there are a number of guesses. Some believe that the phrase originated because the mustard seed is incredibly hard to cut with a knife since it is very small and shiny. Others believe that because mustard plants are tough, stringy and grow densely, mustard farmers needed quality tools in order to harvest their crops. (Martin, 2010). When someone or something cuts the mustard they succeed and meet expectations. In other words, they are of high quality.

In my role as a software tester quality is something I value and at one time quality was also something I thought I could assure. However, I have learnt that there is only one place that I can truly assure quality in, and that place is within me. Based on my journey toward ensuring quality within myself, I have learned various lessons while striving to become a super star tester.

2. Love What You Do

Picture yourself in your current role. When you think about your job and what you do, how do you feel? Do you love what you do? If thinking about your job makes you feel excited and energized, then you have that spark of passion. Becoming a super star tester requires passion. It is the fuel for the journey to superstardom. Having a passion for your role as a software tester will drive you

to push harder, work smarter, and will lay the foundation to becoming a super star tester.

For me my passion has driven me to reach for the stars. I am an active member of my local software testing discussion group, I have co-founded a weekend software testing workshop, I write and present on software testing, and I try to motivate and inspire others. My passion for what I do has helped me achieve many great things. “Nothing great in the world has been accomplished without passion” (Hegel, 1832).

3. Focus on your Strengths

We live in a world that prefers to focus on our weaknesses rather than our strengths. Education systems and employers highlight weaknesses and work with students or employees on improving them. I found when I focused on where I struggled; I started to neglect where I excel. A super star tester focuses on their strengths, talents and abilities. I leverage mine in everything I do. Focusing on what I am good at allows me to keep a positive attitude and helps to feed my passion. Many of the skills I believe super star testers’ possess are keen attention to details, problem solving skills, and the ability to think outside the box. I exercise these skills with puzzles, problem solving games, and creative thinking activities so I can keep my strengths sharp and continue to shine.

4. Build Meaningful Relationships

In my experience testers need to build relationships with our test teams, our developers, our project managers, our business end users and our stakeholders to just name a few. Super star testers transform ordinary, everyday working relationships into meaningful relationships. I use Sanborn’s (2005) “7 B’s of Relationship Building”, when engaging with other people. The 7 B’s are: Be Real, Be Interested, Be a Better Listener, Be Empathic, Be Honest, Be Helpful, and Be Prompt. Not only have I started using the 7 B’s when building new relationships, I have also began incorporating these into my existing relationships. I have found that building stronger, meaningful relationships has helped me in my role as a tester. In many instances the relationships I have built have gained me the respect and cooperation of my team.

5. Leverage Interpersonal Communication

I love to communicate. In my earlier testing days I would produce plans, metrics and reports. I’d discuss testing needs, progress and product quality and try to communicate my findings via email and pretty looking graphs and colors. I found it very easy to wrap myself up in all my documents and started to lose sight of what

was important to communicate to my teams. I quickly found that my piles of documentation weren't adding the value I thought they were and began to challenge myself to find a more effective means to communicate. I have learnt to scale back the documents I provide. Now I prefer face to face communication and follow up with an email only when necessary. I've also learnt to tailor my communication based on my audience or on my message. At times I need to be diplomatic, but always try to be true to myself and stand by my convictions in a professional manner when I need to be.

6. Be an Outstanding Service Provider

Testing is a service role (Kaner, et al., 2002) and just like any service oriented business you are only as good as the service you provide. Superstar testers are extraordinary service providers. They understand how to serve the various members of their team. From programmers to project managers, a superstar tester understands the various needs of the individuals on their team and works to satisfy these needs.

7. Personal Continuous Improvement

In the industry of software development there is constant change. New products, new tools, new ideas, and new methodologies are always emerging. I define a super star tester as a tester who realizes that the industry is always evolving and they need to continue to learn and grow. They take their role of a software tester outside the confines of their day to day job by reading books and blogs; attending training and conferences; and networking with other software testing professionals. Super star testers realize that their continuous personal improvement never ends. They love their continuous learning and actively seek out information.

8. Be Different

Being different makes a difference. For people who know me, this is no surprise, I am different. For those who don't know me well, just wait!

Within the context of testing, my difference plays a very important role. Jerry Weinberg says, "Testers are people who know things can be different" (2008). I like to consider myself among this group of testers. When I approach my testing I know that everything can I do as a tester can be different, from the way I plan, execute, and report metrics to the way I lead my teams and work with my business stakeholders. I adapt, am creative, and strive to make a difference both in what I test as well as the teams I work with. I believe all testers have the ability to think differently and bring their unique perspective to their project teams. Not only can we think differently from one another, we can challenge ourselves to think differently each and every time we approach a new application, challenge or situation. (Kelln, 2010)

9. Champion the Testing Profession

The testing profession has seen its share of struggles and triumphs. Many of the gains our profession has made have been the direct result of passion testers championing the testing profession. In my opinion people such as Jerry Weinberg, James Bach, Michael Bolton, and many others have been amazing champions in moving testing from a task to a profession. Although we have made great progress, there are still those in the software development industry who unfortunately have not

progressed. Super star testers champion the testing profession within their own organizations. They challenge traditional views or 'best practices' that their organizations may have about testing. They help their organizations understand what testing is all about and are active participants in the definition of the testers' responsibilities and role.

10. Sharpen Your Testing Skills

Last but not least, super star testers have super star testing skills. They don't just 'check' software, they test it. (Bolton, 2009) By applying different testing skills such as scripted, exploratory, automation, and others, they push the boundaries of their applications, think outside the box and challenge themselves with new and exciting ways to test software. Find ways to challenge yourself and sharpen your skills. For me I keep my skills sharp by talking with others about testing, both in person and online; attending conferences or training; reading blogs, books, and papers; writing blogs, papers, abstracts and presentations; following other testers online on Wordpress and Twitter; doing puzzles and solving logic problems; and being active in my local software testing organizations. There are many ways to keep your skills sharp. Find something that not only works for you, but something you also enjoy.

11. Pitfalls of Striving to Become a Super Star Tester

I have found striving to become a super star tester is a rewarding and fun challenge; however I have also found a few pitfalls along the way. Although I love every minute of it, there are times I have felt exhausted, frustrated and even overwhelmed. Super star testers often are in high demand. Projects that respect what you can do often don't want to lose you. You can quickly become a hot commodity and sometimes can end up with more than you can handle. On the other hand, organizations that do not value testing or feel that testing is a sub-standard role in software development can quickly burn a super star tester out. In these situations, becoming a super star testing may mean finding another company who is open to new ideas and fuel your passion for super stardom.

12. Summary

As software testers our role is to provide information about software products to our stakeholders in order to assist them in making informed decisions about their software product. Often times we obtain this information by critiquing the quality of the product under test. Whether we believe we can "assure" the quality of a software product or not, we are sometimes given the title of Quality Assurance. I believe living up to a title that infers we can assure quality in software is an impossible role to fill. However, if we turn our critical minds inwards on ourselves, we can work to ensure quality in the role we perform and strive to become a super star tester.

Is this journey to super stardom always easy? Absolutely not! I have found a great number of challenges and in some cases I have been tempted to give up trying. I've made mistakes, taken the wrong direction and sometimes royally screwed things up. But even with the obstacles and missteps I have never given up. Am I a super star tester right now, nope. Will I ever be? I sure hope not, because I'm enjoying the journey, the learning and even the

challenges. I'm having far too much fun, and I hope my journey never ends.

13. REFERENCES

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