MODELS OF MATURITY

Graham Oakes asks if we are grown up enough for maturity.

Graham Oakes: some perverse effects can arise

In the last couple of years, a crop of maturity models have emerged within the SOA community. HP, IBM, Oracle, Sonic, the Open Group – an assortment of vendors and consortia have put forward their take on what architectural maturity is and how we should achieve it.

Sadly, I'm old enough (maybe even mature enough) to have seen this cycle many times before.

Maturity models started out, at least in the software industry, with the CMM – the Software Engineering Institute's Capability Maturity Model. The Institute set out in the early 1980s to solve the industry's problems: late projects, overrun budgets, poor quality, etc. Aren't you glad that all these things have now been put behind us?

So why are SOA maturity models going to be any more successful?

It's not that I see any fundamental weaknesses in the models themselves. Indeed, I've often found the CMM and the models that grew out of it (SW-CMM, CMMi) to be useful *aides memoire*. If I'm helping an organisation think through where it needs to go next with its systems development capabilities, they help me identify useful questions to ask.

Likewise for the group of maturity models that have emerged more recently from the project management community (P3M3, OPM3 and so on). I'm sure that a well-thought through SOA maturity model will prove equally useful.

No, the problem with maturity models is that an organisation actually needs to be pretty mature to use them effectively.

If you come to the model without the right mindset, you end up focusing on ticking the right boxes to move to the next level, rather than doing whatever needs to be done to maximise the value you deliver. That way lies mindless bureaucracy.

Even for organisations that avoid this trap, there are some perverse effects that can arise from achieving high levels of maturity.

For example, some organisations seem to think that being assessed at level five (the peak of maturity on most models) means they have nothing left to learn. Likewise, some people use the fact that they're at level five as a reason to avoid change. "If we change that process, we risk losing our level five rating," they say.

(In fact, this is the exact opposite of what you should be doing at level five – by then you should be capable of constantly testing new ways to optimise your process, through a series of statistically-controlled experiments.)

Of course, there's an obvious solution to this problem. I think we all need an Organisational Maturity Maturity Model (OMMM – think of it as a Buddhist chant…).

Until you're at level five on that, you shouldn't consider any other maturity models.

● *SOA, Web Services & Enterprise Integration Evaluation Centre Expert Dr Graham Oakes is the principal of content management, product development and customer service strategies consultancy Graham Oakes Ltd. His book Project Reviews, Assurance and Governance was published by Gower Publishing in October 2008. Email: graham@grahamoakes.co.uk. Website: www.grahamoakes.co.uk.*