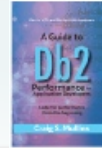




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## zData Perspectives

### The Return of the DBA Proverbs

by Craig S. Mullins

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My previous columns of DBA proverbs have proved to be quite popular and I've been asked by several readers when they could expect to read more of them. Well, the wait is over, as this issue's column is devoted to the latest and greatest quotes, sayings, and proverbs that apply to the discipline of database administration.

Hopefully, we can all agree with German writer and physicist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who said, "There is nothing worse than aggressive stupidity." As a DBA, it sometimes seems like you're always fighting the good fight against stupidity. But nobody ever thinks they're stupid, right? So, how can we identify and combat stupidity? Perhaps U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart can help. He famously said (about pornography), "I know it when I see it." But how helpful is that really? Personally, my opinion is that aggressive stupidity goes by another name at many organizations these days ... management.

question can best be answered by Naguib Mahfouz, an Egyptian writer who won the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature. He stated, "You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions." Got any questions? I didn't think so ...

Satisfied with our level of wisdom, DBAs can then embark upon their duties, perhaps the most important of which is database design. Designing effective databases takes time and effort. A good DBA should take advice from the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, who noted that one should "Lay plans for the accomplishment of the difficult before it becomes difficult; make something big by starting with something small." I'm sure those of us who started out with a small database and now have to support a multi-terabyte implementation can relate to that!

And as we design our database systems, we should definitely take heed of the wisdom of physicist Gene Brown, who said, "Foolproof systems don't take into account the ingenuity of fools." How many "foolproof systems" have you worked on only

But let's face it, opinions aren't facts. DBAs deal with facts on a daily basis as we manage our databases, tune our programs and systems, and implement new features and functionality. If you ignore the facts, you won't be a successful DBA for very long. Indeed, former U.S. President John Adams had it right when he famously said that, "Facts are stubborn things." But many today instead treat facts more like former President Ronald Reagan, who misquoted Adams, saying "Facts are stupid things."

So, we need to understand the facts and get them right. Then we'll be on the path to proper database administration. But, of course, facts alone aren't enough to be a wise and effective DBA. We can't turn all of our DBAs into a modern-day equivalent of "Dragnet's" Sgt. Joe Friday, constantly asking for "Just the facts, ma'am." We need to turn facts into knowledge and then wisdom.

Data is facts out of context, whereas knowledge applies context. And wisdom can be thought of as knowledge applied. For example, you may have the knowledge that fatty foods are bad for you, but if you eat burgers and fries every day, you aren't very wise. So, how can we gauge wisdom? Perhaps this

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to be called in to fix a problem in the middle of the night? Of course, if you've really designed a foolproof system that never goes down, then you can be proud. But most DBAs are humble sorts. And, as Gene Brown also taught us, "The really tough thing about humility is you can't brag about it."

But then again, maybe DBAs aren't that humble at all or are just pretending to be humble. Of course, pretending can be a tricky business, at least according to the late, great American author Kurt Vonnegut. He said, "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be." What are you pretending to be today?

In the end, though, whether or not you're successful boils down to how hard you work ... and a little bit of luck. But Thomas Jefferson had it absolutely correct when he said, "I'm a great believer in luck, and I find the harder I work, the more I have of it."

So, with a little luck, and even more hard work, we can test this latest set of DBA proverbs, remaining humble, avoiding fools, and gaining wisdom all the way. Until next time ...

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