

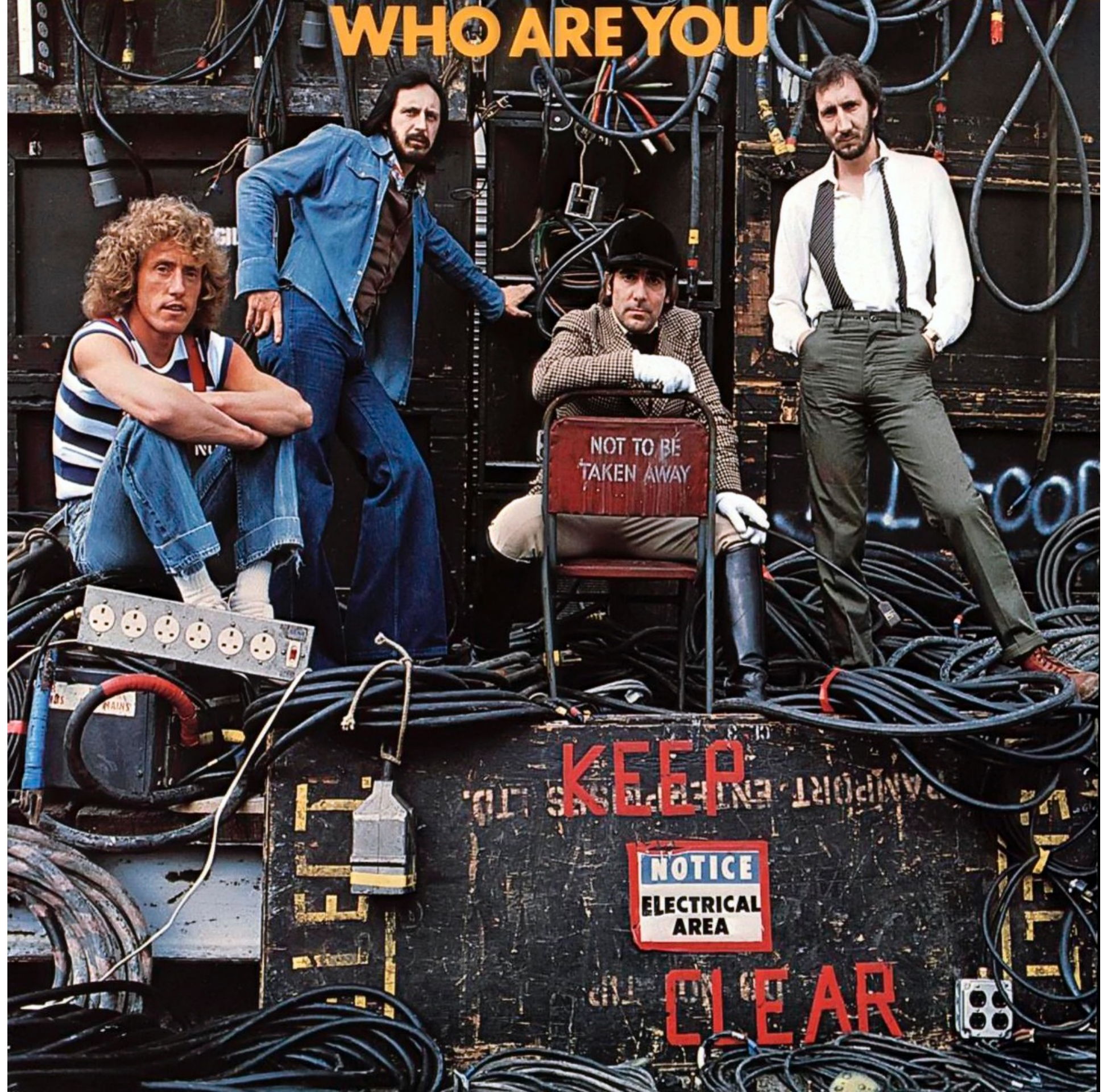
How To Talk To Non-Engineers

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March 19, 2015

O'Reilly Software Architecture Conference

WHO ARE YOU



KEEP

NOTICE
ELECTRICAL
AREA

CLEAR

Has This Happened To You?

- Designer: “Make it look exactly like *this*.”
- Product Manager: “These 17 initial features are all equally critical for launch!”
- Salesperson: “These entirely separate 17 initial features are all equally important for me to get any customers!!”

Some Assumptions

You and your colleagues:

- want each other to succeed
- are all good at your jobs



Your Work Context



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Are
engineers
more precise than
non-engineers?

Auto-editing

- They don't care about implementation details.
- Unless they are not implementation details.
- They don't care about your abstract ideas, they care about the thing being built.

Ask Questions

- Don't just do what you're told.

Ask about Scale

- Sizes, rates, changes, freshness
- Initial usage vs. Expected growth
- Plan on different systems for different time horizons

Ask about Limits

- “There is no limit” means someone doesn’t understand the problem well enough.
- Even if consumers are told there’s no limit, you need to understand what the practical limits are.

Ask about Differential Treatment

- Different data, different users, different experiences don't all need the same **expensive** treatment

Understand the Cost of Failure

“99.9999.....%”

vs

“We could lose up to 15 minutes of newly added data and it will take us up to 20 minutes to come back after a catastrophic failure.”

$$\textit{cost} * \textit{risk} \geq \textit{expense}$$

- Shave off high purity
- Determine the comparative importance of all content

P0 means you're doing it wrong

- Ask “stakeholders” to **stack rank** features. No groups of priorities.
- That ranking must be allowed to change when new information is learned!

Beware “Executive Suggestion”

- “Those buttons would look nice if they were blue.”
- “My phone never works in the subway, it would be cool if I could enter new tasks when offline.”



Beware “Engineer Intimidation”

- “VARCHAR fields can’t be longer than 255 characters”
- “You can’t sort internationalized text properly.”



Balancing vs. Absolutes

- Try to understand their costs
- Elucidate your costs
- “We can’t do X” (not helpful) VS
 - “X would be very expensive” (helpful)
 - “X means we won’t have time or money for Y.” (helpful)

If you only remember one slide...

- Assume **goodwill** until proven wrong
- Develop your **understanding** of others' constraints as you help them understand yours
- “**Here's what it costs**” vs “No”

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