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Paralysis by Precision

By Paperitalo Staff

In the summer of 1974, early in my career at that famous soap company in Cincinnati, I was assigned to be the editor of the piping and process design manuals. The company had its own internal design standards group of about 25 people. I was sent there because I could write. With this went the job as secretary of the process steering committee, which set standards and design practices for this area.

My predecessor was about fifteen years my senior. He had held the job for many years. He left me with (I remember it well) 119 standards and design practices in various stages of completion. His final comment was, based on his experience, it would take me about a year and a half to get through this stack.

I looked around at what others were doing in this department. They were laboring over commas and semi-colons, dashes and periods. For most of them, completing a page a day seemed about the norm. I set to work at the slowest pace I could stand. I pondered some dashes and semicolons, made a wild and mad excursion into quotation marks. Despite my best efforts to work up to the norm of the department, I had my desk cleaned off in about five weeks (it would have been sooner, but I had backed up the print shop). The process systems committee was ecstatic. To my knowledge, nothing ever blew up or fell down because of my sloppy behavior over commas. Our company received the benefits of these new standards and practices months ahead of schedule. I was looking for something to do. I was a pariah in the department.

This kind of stuff is still going on. I have written about it in my book, "The Lazy Engineer's Path to Excellence." Engineers do it, but so do mid-level managers.

It is foolishness.

If you are in a thinking job, your job is to aid in spinning the invoice printer as fast as possible. Certainly, you are not to do sloppy work, resulting in errors. However, massaging the daylight out of decisions, either through calculations beyond predictable precision or for the sake of seeking some sort of numerical ecstasy is just as irresponsible as sloppiness.

I suspect the real reason people engage in this behavior is to protect their jobs or fulfill some personal sense of importance. For if one is at some (perceived) high level in a company, they are supposed to be making high level decisions. This involves excruciatingly examining every

document that comes across their desk and throwing them back down the chain for the slightest infraction, the tiniest math error.

There is a famous story told about General Patton that I have used many times before. As his troops were dashing across Europe in the winter of 1945, he called in his engineers and said, we'll be crossing that river ahead in about two days. I want to see some drawings of the bridge you'll throw across for us. A day and a half went by, and he called his engineers in again for a report. "Where's my drawings?" The reply was, "They will be done in three more days." Patton was furious--"We have to cross the river tomorrow!"

"Oh, not a problem, sir. The bridge is done. It is just going to take three more days to get your drawings."

It is a major problem, and hence a major loss of revenue, when we wait for the drawings when the bridge could have already been built. Culturally, however, this is a tough set of habits to break when they are well entrenched in a company. We'll talk about speeding up your culture next week.

For safety this week, we know that response to accidents must be done swiftly and yet competently. That is why we train and have safety meetings. Don't stop.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##