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Soft Management

By Paperitalo Staff

Here in the United States there is change coming--change from analog television signals to digital ones. This change, publicized for over a year, was originally scheduled for last month and has now been pushed to June, apparently because a significant minority of the population just couldn't quite get their television sets ready on time. I am simultaneously chagrined and amused by this condition, for I envision (cannot prove) that this same sector of the population that just couldn't quite get their act together to be ready for the change sits around every weekend screaming their heads off watching sports players and coaches that do not perform to their satisfaction. Thus our US Congress, obviously having nothing better to do right now, passed a bill extending the time for the changeover. Do you see the irony and hypocrisy here? Why do we expect accountability in sports, something that clearly doesn't matter, while in nearly all the rest of society, accountability is a bad word?

In my first career job, as a co-op student in a small engineering department of a custom machinery manufacturer, I found myself working for the chief engineer. He had been moved to the engineering department, I was told, because when he was shop superintendent, he kicked a worker who was on his hands and knees welding whose attention he wanted. The shop union, rightly, threatened to walk off the job if he was not removed. So I found myself working for a tyrant not unlike working for my dad on the farm when I was a teenager. Both my dad and my boss were members of the "Greatest Generation"--men who had survived the Depression and World War II and were used to getting things done--no nonsense. My boss came to work early, chain smoked, barked orders, swore like a sailor, went to lunch and drank three martinis, came back, chain smoked, swore like a sailor, barked orders and went home about 7 pm (as an aside, although I don't recommend his lifestyle choices, I'll note that he lived into his early eighties despite this regimen). I was also there Monday through Friday and half of Saturday every week, just like he was. He held us accountable.

I miss it.

Not long after this experience started (March 1970), the world changed. We all went to sensitivity training, learned that the f word was reserved for comedy clubs, cable television and movies and

was never to be used in the workplace. If you were not kinder and gentler to your fellow worker, especially if you were boss, you and your company might be sued for being so insensitive. In essence, it became acceptable for plaintiff lawyers to be nasty through lawsuits if you had been insensitive at work.

Up to a point, this was a necessary and good change. It is reasonable to expect one can go to work and be free from physical harm and verbal abuse. It is reasonable that one be judged on their performance as relates to their work and nothing else. But when I said "I miss it" what I mean is I miss straight-forward stand up assessment of one's performance. I think the pendulum has swung too far to the advantage of labor plaintiff lawyers, and today mediocre performance is often accepted out of fear of trumped up lawsuits. Accumulated over many situations and time, the lack of accountability these conditions have promoted lead businesses to fail. And with failure comes loss of jobs for all. When this happens over a widespread number of businesses, it affects a country's entire economy.

The most famous examples of this, worldwide, today are the US auto companies. They did not arrive at their current condition because sales fell off last year, they arrived at their current condition because they were not prepared for their sales to fall off last year or indeed any time. They had no vision of the future and were not prepared for any eventuality. Simply, their lack of preparedness caught up with them.

The proposed solutions for these fragile factories are equally fraught with potential failure. Somebody somewhere (I have not seen anyone cite an authoritative source) says the salvation of GM and Chrysler is fuel efficient cars. Why is that so? I have heard the statement many times in the last few months but have not seen any data, authority or entity of any kind cited to back it up. It has become conventional wisdom without question and without proof. I would even ask what a fuel efficient car is. Today's cars are two to three times as fuel efficient as my first one was. Is "fuel efficient" not a moving definition related to fuel price?

I have stated here many times that the laws of economics are as inviolable as the law of gravity, yet, as a people we do not seem to ever want to accept this. In the late seventies, there was talk, that for strategic reasons, we should place a 100% tariff on imported oil. Usually opposed to tariffs, I could agree with this, for this was about a strategic issue, not an economic one. Imagine where we would be today had this been done. Of course, many scientists would be out of work which are working today, for the economic system would have already responded on its own to the matter of fuel efficiency. And GM and Chrysler would already be gone or have already transformed themselves into worthy competitors. The US government would not even need a department of energy.

In the pulp and paper industry, we have done no better. We have had legions of managers whose sole objective was to keep the game going until they retired and took their share of the pie home to a cushy mansion in suburban Las Vegas. They had no vision and no interest in the business beyond their last payday. Yes, I know some great retirees that did their jobs well and did their best to leave a great industry in their corner of the business, but there are many others that should be ashamed of the legacy they left.

For us, that is all in the past and needs to be forgotten. The question is, what is in our future? How can we adapt to the realities I have been speaking of here for the last couple of months? We are right now in a time of stupendous change. What can we do with the industry we have left to make it competitive, vibrant and unassailable from all threats in the future? It is certain we cannot, even if we wanted to, defeat the Internet as a formidable competitor. The question is, what is the viable path forward for everything else? Do we have the nerve to risk our own retirement to leave the legacy of a vibrant industry, ready to be a worthy competitor for the next forty or fifty years? Can you look 22 year olds in the eye and say with certainty you are preparing and will be leaving them a great career path in pulp and paper? What are you going to do to match the good parts of the example left by the "Greatest Generation"?

I am weekly witnessing people in our industry wringing their hands and bemoaning how bad conditions are in our industry and the economy as a whole. This is only because of their limited frame of reference. 1980 - 1982 were worse than now. Look at what our industry in the US did in the 1930's--the Institute of Paper Chemistry was founded in 1929 of all years. The actions of the leadership of our industry in the 1930's make us all look like a bunch of softies--just look at the mills that were started in the 1930's--you may even work in one. It is time to stop wringing our hands and start doing.

Of course, we can first start by not getting hurt and not letting anyone who works for us get hurt. This helps to keep all hands well and on deck, for we need everyone healthy and well for the challenges immediately ahead.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##