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## ***If only...***

By Paperitalo Staff

Should you have been unfortunate enough to have been in an accident, you have no doubt had a thought process that started with "If only..." If you have ever worked for a facility that has either been shut down or gone into bankruptcy, you will have the same experience, "If only." It may go something like this: "If only I had been more expressive in (promoting) (blocking) that (project) (action) and so forth."

I have met many people who have had this experience. Often, we have great hindsight as to the things that really matter; we lack great foresight.

This morning, I was sitting in my office and noticed the screensaver on one of my computers showing pictures of a kraft mill long since shut down and demolished. It was a large mill, fairly well located. Management made a number of mistakes, some not obvious in looking at the pictures, others quite obvious from these pixels of data. It really makes no difference now, the mill has been gone for nearly a decade and I understand the city is rejuvenating the site for some tourist activities, a pathetic trade of well-paying jobs for minimum wage ones.

You are reading this from, most likely, an operating facility. I am going to give you two important challenges that are vital to the success of your company, no matter your position. The first one is this: visualize your facility shutting down. This is hard for most people, especially if the facility (the one I mentioned above started up in the late 1930's) has been around a long time. Believe this: history doesn't matter in this case--the future is what matters. It may take you a while to accept this idea, but it is an important one for you to master. Your facility can be shut down, and it can be shut down within your career span.

The second one is this: Once you have accepted and visualized that your facility can shut down, what will be the "If only's" you will think up in the weeks and months after the shutdown? Get out a pencil and paper and make a list of them.

When you complete the exercise above (and you never really complete it, you will just go through cycles of the exercise from now on), act on your list. Do the things you have identified, especially the hard ones. The hard ones will usually be the ones involving modifying people's behavior. You have got to do them, because you have identified them as things that need to be changed.

For a long time now, it has been a popular management practice to downsize businesses, i.e., expect the same work with fewer employees. All the time, people tell me, "We are so busy since we were downsized." I think you missed the point. You are only so busy if you continue to try to do all the same tasks that used to be done. My guess is, even after downsizing, half the work done in any office is wasted effort that does not pass the Jim Thompson test of being tied to the spinning of the invoice printer. When I visit enterprises, I am bemused by all the scurrying around and activity that is absolutely useless. Why isn't this fixed? Because those involved can't see it-- they have been doing the same things for so long, they do them by rote. They never challenge or test why they do what they do. I think there are two reasons for this: (1) familiarity and (2) a hidden agenda of job security. For if they eliminate enough tasks, someone may just eliminate their job.

So back to my original challenge. Play the "If only" game. Then make the lists and take the actions. And in a few weeks, do it again. And again. If you play the "If only" game now, and it catches on in your facility, you may avoid playing it in a dreaded venue: sitting at your kitchen table and staring at your unemployment check.

Of course in safety, we play the "If only" game every time there is an accident. And we are serious about it. And we modify our behavior.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##