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Impossible until inevitable

By Paperitalo Staff

A couple of weeks ago, we reported on Pulp and Paper Radio International that a major company had permanently closed a box plant in Western Canada. The interesting element to this story was that the facility had been on strike since May. The union, and the employees, were absolutely shocked when the decision came down to just shut the place.

I have seen this played out so many times I have lost count. No one thinks their employer can shut down, no one thinks they can lose their job. I have speculated before that it is apparently some sort of human mental defense mechanism that creates this denial. It truly is impossible until it is inevitable.

Sadly, I think many facilities could be saved if the local management and employees would work as a team in a timely fashion to avert disaster. Unfortunately, by the time disaster is obvious, it is too late. I used to get pulled into situations as a consultant to save the place. Years and wisdom have taught me to look at the anxious assignment with a careful eye—even though I have been paid well to attempt to be a miracle worker, I don't appreciate what it does to my reputation when I can't, by the time I arrive, stave off the inevitable.

So, a couple of thoughts for you. Even if you are working in a nearly new facility, it will be less valuable tomorrow and one day closer to shutting down than it is today. It is just like the human body—it is deteriorating. Someone else will come along, sooner or later, that makes the products you make (if they are even still wanted) better and more economical than you do. Your only hope is to slow the rate of decline.

One stance you can take is to calculate the time until your retirement and ponder if the facility will last that long. It is a selfish approach, but one taken by probably 95% of the working population in any business. I'll submit it is not the approach taken by real leaders.

Real leaders think in decades, not years, not months. Of course, they take care of business today, but they think a lot about taking care of business tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, too.

I have been in many paper mills where it is obvious that no one thought about tomorrow. Of course, the people who made those decisions are long gone, so it is impossible to determine what thinking flaw they had. But it is certainly evident they had a thinking flaw.

So what can you do? First off, get rid of the idea of impossible—for a closure is certainly possible. Then work as hard as you can on assuring whatever you are responsible for has the best chance possible of surviving. In order to do this, you'll have to ask others what they think—you are simply too close to the area of responsibility to see it objectively. The main thing is to make sure you are doing something about your business's future. Today.

However, we never take a break from safety, do we? What is the future of safety? I have some new ideas we will be sharing shortly.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##