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Modernizing the pulp and paper industry: Attitudes

By Paperitalo Staff

If one has the interest to do the research, they may find "determined" to be defined as "resolute, staunch, decided, settled, resolved." Likewise, one may find "stubborn" defined as "unreasonably obstinate; obstinately unmoving; fixed or set in purpose or opinion; difficult to manage or suppress; hard, tough, or stiff." No offense, but in three plus decades in the pulp and paper industry, I have encountered plenty of stubborn people who merely thought of themselves as determined. This is one of three conditions that I believe has caused our industry great difficulties for at least the past decade and a half. The other two conditions are a lack of vision (hopefully no definition necessary) and a lack of a will to change.

These three are a deadly combination in any endeavor. They have been most disastrous for us. They have manifest themselves in opportunities lost, strategies poorly (and expensively) executed, and unnecessary angst for all involved. These problems have been experienced worldwide, not confined to one or another location or country. Some of the actions have been admirable, bold visionary steps that did not quite work out as planned (Jari comes to mind) and others have been stupid decision on top of stupid decision (we'll spare the guilty of public disclosure). A third category has been those grades and sectors that have seemed to stand still, ignoring their world falling down around them until it is too late.

How do we break the stranglehold these deadly attitudes have upon us? It would take a book, and you tell me I have to write something you can read in five or ten minutes. So, I'll give a smattering of examples and leave it for you to extrapolate to the bigger picture.

1. In what we sell (you know, the stuff that spins the invoice printer) we have to understand our competition. Take newsprint, for instance. Newsprint's competition has not been other newsprint; it has been radio, television, internet and handheld mobile devices. Not that it has not been done, but I can say I have not seen a learned study that talks about how newsprint can compete with any of these formidable competitors. I spoke of marketing last week and I firmly believe we as an industry do not understand the subject in the minutest of ways in any grade other than tissue. We must do a better job of understanding marketing.

2. In what we buy, we have to try new things. Whether it is chemicals, additives, equipment, engineering services, construction services, consultants or whatever, we don't know what is out there that may benefit us unless we try new things. Unfortunately, the punishment for trying new things and failing is such that no one will try new things. Additionally, the modern, all-

encompassing software management programs (and you know how I hate them) make changing suppliers or adding new things as difficult as possible. We must change our cultures and systems so that managers are comfortable trying new goods and services.

3. In who we employ, we need people with different thinking. Going back to our alma mater, good old I MISS U, for all of our new hires tends to incubate and foster lock-step thinking. This does not promote innovation.

4. When we want to experiment with management systems, we need to work hard at it and do our own homework. Hiring a consultant with the latest buzz words is, quite frankly, a whitewash job. I know plenty of senior managers who have hired the authors of top ranked management consulting books to come in and spread their b--I mean knowledge around. This is not a system change; this is just following the latest fad. Changing management systems for the better involves real work, lots of it, done by your own people (with some help from the outside, used judiciously).

Due to my unique role in the industry, many senior executives and managers, whether downsized, outsized, eliminated or just plain fired often give me a call soon after the event. Almost universal in their new found freedom is the realization that they have been living an emasculated, narrow life. Most, if they have the means, find great liberation in their new circumstances. What is sad to me is that they come to these realizations only after they have gotten out of the routines that have been slowly building in their lives for many years, when responsibilities became imperceptibly larger each day.

In this is the lesson for you unconsciously burdened by routine tasks now. Become aware of your condition. Set aside some time to make your business, and your career, better. Look at the four simple points I make above. If you can do it no faster, tackle one per year for the next four years. Let me know how it turns out. I am sure you will have a better business and a better career.

All's for naught, however, if we lose life or limb in an accident. Practice safety first every day.

Be safe and we will talk next week. ##