

Management Ideas



FOR STILL BETTER

RESULTS

RELATIONS

REPUTATION

a monthly newsletter to key executive-leaders
on practices, possibilities and ideas generally
for stepped up performance

edited by

N. H. ATTHREYA MA PhD

author, educator & consultant

on problem-solving and creative ideas

IN THIS ISSUE

- 3424 A COMPANY HISTORIAN
- 3425 MR, MRS, OR MS.
- 3426 TRAINING LESSONS FROM GERMANY
- 3427 THE MAKING OF GOOD ENGINEERS:
THE TOSHIBA METHOD
- 3428 WHEN BUSINESS IS BAD
- 3429 A GIGGLE A DAY

RE: THIS FORMAT

A reader (Atul Rego) has been suggesting this new format for many months now. He says: "Primarily, this will save filing space. In addition, this will save paper. If you want to provide space for readers to make notes, a large margin will be the logical thing." I hope readers find this logic acceptable.

EDITOR

**3424
A COMPANY HISTORIAN**

Those who don't remember history are condemned to repeat it, observed Harvard Scholar George Santayana. When we know the history, we realise there are lessons for the organisation's good future. Some one skilled has to record, analyse and report, thereby enabling the personnel to learn from the successes and failures, in the organization, and to build on these lessons. This someone is the company historian. Organizations can have him full time or part time - that is a matter of detail.

3425
MR, MRS, or MS.

Reader Jayant Nene shares his experience in a tricky aspect of business communication, and makes a suggestion.

"Women sometimes don't prefix their name by 'Ms.' or 'Mrs'. Order from a North Indian Company was signed by one Rohit Tayal. In our acceptance and further communication, I went on addressing 'Dear Mr. Tayal'. Imagine my plight, when I once talked to that 'Purchase Officer' over the phone,.....a distinctly feminine voice, firing me for delayed shipment.

Situation in the international correspondence is even more misleading. The Chinese use 'Christian' business names, making it easy for me to be sure that 'Jo Ching' is 'Ms' but 'Vera Lee' may be a 'Ms'. The Japanese, though 'westernized' in their business attire, strictly use their ethnic names. And whether 'Y.Ohmoni' is 'Ms', or 'Ms?... I have no clue.

Foreigners have the same dilemma when they encounter our Indian names. I have received some letter from abroad, beginning 'Dear Jayant Nene; smartly avoiding offence.

We follow the social pattern of believing all business or professional persons are 'Men' unless the name is clearly preceded by a 'Ms.' or 'Miss' or 'Mrs'. But now let us recognize the significant role played by ladies in modern business. It would be a good practice to prefix our typed name at the bottom of the letter by 'Mr' or 'Ms.'

3426
TRAINING LESSONS FROM
GERMANY

If U.K. can learn from Germany, we too can learn from Germany. The following story by Kenneth Gooding appeared recently in Financial Times (U.K.)

Ask Rheinhold Wagner why productivity is so much higher at Alcan's aluminium rolling mills in Germany than at those in the UK and immediately he points to vast differences in the way employees are trained to look after the expensive equipment they operate.

Alcan Deutschland employs 3,800 people and 250 of them are apprentices, each one being trained for 3½ years. The total includes 175 craft apprentices, and Wagner says that, as a matter of policy, Alcan always finds craft apprentices a job at the end of their training, even though the work at first might not be what they were trained for. The idea, he says, is to keep them in the production system. "This gives us a tremendously skilled workforce."

In 1991, when he took over responsibility for Alcan's UK metal rolling operations, which employ about 1,450, Wagner was surprised to find no similar apprentice programme existed.

When he began, each UK employee was taking twice as long to produce a tonne of finished metal. But that has been improving. UK operations are now 10 to 15 per cent less productive than in Germany.

One way Wagner measures productivity is mill "uptime" - or time the mills are working normally against the total time available. Wagner says Germany needs to improve because "uptime" is about 85 per cent. In the UK, it is only 70 per cent.

The big deficiency in the UK he says, is that equipment is not maintained carefully enough. "And if the mill is not reliable, you can't expect to deliver on time."

At the beginning of the rolling process, aluminium is heated in re-melt furnances. Wagner says that furnances at Alcan's mill in Rogerstone, south Wales, consume 40 per cent more energy than comparable furnances in Germany. Partly this is due to differences in equipment, but it is also partly because of less attention to detail. And that comes back to training."

Alcan, based in Canada and the western world's second-largest aluminium producer, started to reorganise its European operations as long ago as 1976 in order to prepare for the unified European market.

In 1987 Wagner, already chief executive of Alcan Deutschland, was handed extra responsibility when the parent company disbanded its European headquarters in Geneva to save money and to flatten its international management structure. He was also put in charge of Alcan's operations in Italy, Spain and Switzerland. Another reorganisation in 1991 gave him responsibility for Alcan's rolling operations in the UK and, therefore, all the European rolling operations.

Alcan has been spending heavily on these rolling operations. It has a half-share in Aluminium Norf in Germany, already the world's biggest aluminium rolling mill, where annual capacity is being doubled to 1.4m tonnes at a cost of DM900m (£360m). Another \$100m (£66.2m) has been spent on a new, wholly owned foil mill in Italy linked with Norf. This has raised fears at Rogerstone that the 240,000-tonne-a-year plant has no future.

These concerns intensified last month when another 200 job losses were announced there and 46 at associated mills in Glasgow and Falkirk. Rogerstone employed 3,000 at its peak; now the workforce will drop to 770. But Wagner insists the cuts simply reflect the sharp drop in demand from export markets, mainly Germany, and a need to bring capacity and costs into line with depressed circumstances.

He points out that Alcan has spent £64m modernising Rogerstone since 1984 - including £8m of the £23m spent in the UK last year - and the plant is needed to provide specialised rolled products for the whole of Europe. It is also part of his strategy to build Rogerstone's share of the UK market to 60 per cent, a target it is close to achieving.

That is why, says Wagner, he must find ways of improving training - and consequently productivity at the UK mills.

3427
THE MAKING OF GOOD
ENGINEERS: THE TOSHIBA
METHOD

Organizations prefer "the locals", the sons of the soil, the Bhumiputras, even at the professional engineers level. Engineers also would prefer to live and work in "their" linguistic states. The reality is that organizations have to take engineers from "other" states - sounds almost like other countries! One of the problems such engineers face is ignorance of the local language, the local culture. The following story from the Nikkei Weekly can have few pointers for them.

Toshiba Corporation has been employing foreigners who graduate from Japanese universities over the past several years. However, three years ago a multinational labor plan went into effect in order to recruit workers, mostly engineers, in foreign countries. These engineers are employed at the company's factories in the suburbs of Tokyo-the Kawasaki, Fuchu, Ome and Hino plants.

Asked to comment on Toshiba's Japanese language program for these engineers, Yasuhiko Tsukada the manager of the International Training Group, Personnel & Manpower Development Division gave some more details about the firm's recruiting program as well as the lessons.

"Our overseas labor recruiting plan went into effect because we foresee a shortage of skilled workers (engineers) in the future. Through this plan, Toshiba hopes to also learn more about these (foreign) engineers and researchers - how long they intend to work for the same company and

whether they can understand the Japanese management philosophy that can be seen in the unique Japanese life-long employment system," Tsukada said.

"Toshiba mostly recruits engineers in Canada, the United States, Britain and Taiwan. The first requirement is for them to have graduated from university and upper institutions. The second requirement is that their interests in the job suit the position the company is offering.

"They are interviewed overseas and then come to Japan for the final interview, to see the workplace and to get an idea of the work environment. It is only after this that they decide whether they wish to join the firm," Tsukada said.

"Through recruiting foreign engineers we not only solve the engineering shortage problem but also internationalize and activate the engineering division. Toshiba hopes that these engineers will exchange different ideas and improve their creativity. The most important task is for them to obtain good business performance," Tsukada stated.

"We have an average of 20 to 30 foreigners joining Toshiba annually. Although Japanese is not one of the hiring requirements, basic Japanese is needed at the laboratories. Toshiba's Japanese language training courses are conducted in order to familiarize foreign workers with basic Japanese spoken in both the business world and in private life," Tsukada explained.

He pointed out that the course is directed by professionals. "All workers participate in our four-week intensive course from 9 a.m. through 5 p.m., Mondays to Fridays to prepare them for their jobs," he said.

Toshiba first started this course, which takes about 130 hours to complete, in September 1990. The evening courses got underway in December of the same year.

"All the workers are required to take the intensive course, however, the evening course is open to only those who wish to continue their Japanese studies. They are held at our training center in Kawasaki and in a meeting room at the Fuchu plant," Tsukada said.

"About half of the 120 foreign employees, except 40 who graduated from Japanese universities, are currently enrolled in the evening classes,"

he noted. "Kanji are a major stumbling block for our Western engineers whereas Asians can pick the meaning up very quickly. It takes a long time for Westerners to master kanji," he noted.

"We have spring semesters which are held from April to September and fall semesters from October to March. Classes are given five hours a week, that is, from 6.30 p.m. to 8.30 p.m. on Wednesdays and between 9 a.m. and noon on Saturdays. Before these semesters start, students are given a short written placement test," Tsukada said.

"It is encouraging to note that most students taking these courses are eager to study Japanese. Many of those who complete the advanced course hope to continue their studies so that they will one day be capable of handling business talks, technical terms and delicate expressions," the Toshiba official commented.

Tsukada said some engineers are so keen and feel that the progress they are making is too slow. "Showing just how keen they are, I have even been asked in the past if I can introduce teachers to give private lessons," he said.

Classes are divided into six levels. Beginners III: learning hiragana, katagana and a little conversation; Beginners II: learning to write about 100 kanji, and conversation containing easy sentences; Beginners I: learning about 100 kanji and easy sentences; Middle II: learning about 120 kanji, self-expressions using complex sentences and reading and understanding; Middle I: learning 500 kanji, developing everyday conversation by using the right words at the right time; Advanced: improving speech and presentation abilities and attaining the same level as the Japanese language proficiency test for foreigners (administered by the Association of International Education, Japan and the Japan Foundation).

The courses are conducted by three professional Japanese language institutions. All of the instructors have gained experience at leading companies with a lot of overseas experience. Only in the beginners class is English also used to help get the meaning across.

"At the end of each semester we have a get together so that the students can demonstrate their Japanese ability through speeches.

The company's general manager, a plant superintendent and other senior company officials attended the last gathering. They were pleasantly impressed - especially by the speakers' good sense of humor. A lot of them were able to imitate the Japanese down to the hilt," Tsukada said.

"Here, I should emphasize, that some of these engineers have almost become too Japanese in their ways. I feel this can sometimes be a shame as these people should be themselves in order to put their talents to full use," he concluded.

3428
WHEN BUSINESS IS BAD

The temptation is to give a shake hand - wooden or golden. This is said to be more common in the west. There are, however, exceptions. Here is a sample.

As business slowed for American manufacturers during the recent recession, some two million workers lost their jobs, according to industry estimates. But Yellow Springs Instrument Co. found another solution, reports Inc. (May).

After realizing it would have to cut its workweek to 36 hours to keep all of its employees, Yellow Springs, Ohio-based YSI decided to use the downtime for education. The company then worked with a local college to set up mandatory classes in information gathering and communication, as well as basic math and English skills.

The cost of the program reached six figures, a substantial sum for the \$30 million-in-sales company. But CEO Malte von Matthiessen says the money was well spent. In addition to keeping workers, the company sees a payoff in improved effectiveness of its self-directed production teams.

3429
A GIGGLE A DAY

An apple a day keeps the doctor away - that is a western proverb. A giggle a day keeps 'the doctor' away - that can be a universal proverb. To help maintain perspective - and this is a daily demand in today's pressure corporate world - we need a live sense of humour. Columnist Lona O'Connor makes the point well and gives workable guidelines in an article in the Free Press (U.S.A.):

Even if you weren't brought up to laugh at others, there is still much to be said for the virtues of laughing at something - anything - every work day. You may prefer to substitute a cartoon calendar or a word-a-day calendar to get your giggles.

TAKE MY JOKE, PLEASE. But however you do it, do get your daily giggles, please. If you can't laugh about your work now and then, you're losing some of the resilience and perspective you need to keep plugging through the worst times.

And what could be worse - and less funny - than not having a job? "I think there might be some room for humor, even with a subject as grim as job hunting," writes L.A. of Troy. This reader sent "Twelve Tips for Job Hunting," which includes a list of "the secret language of prospective employers." For instance, "Refresh my memory" means "I never heard of you."

L.A. also compares job hunting to dating: "For women, a job interview is like a date, when the guy says, I'll call you, and he never does. For men, a job interview is like a date when the woman says, 'I had a great time,' but she's always busy when he calls. If your love life is something less than nirvana, don't job hunt unless you really, really love rejection."

Granted, there's an edge to L.A.'s jokes. It's not easy to get laughs out of situations where you've been rejected or, worse, forgotten. Just because you can make a joke out of something doesn't mean it doesn't hurt like crazy. If you watch the Comedy Channel enough, you'll notice yourself laughing at extremely painful situations that have been transformed into humor.

PASS/FAIL What's funny about failure or about mid-life? Jack Matson, an engineering professor at the University of Houston, taught a course in failure in which one exercise required students to see who could produce the most ridiculous laugh. The student who acted the most foolish got the highest grade.

Not only was that a funny way to look at failure, but it was also creative. That's another point in favor of laughter. Matson got the idea for the failure course when he realized he was reaching a mid-life crisis. So you might also say that in this case, humor, creativity and sanity all blended together to help get him through a life passage.

SITUATIONAL HUMOR. The more stressful the situation, the more people use laughter to defuse it. If you find yourself thinking, "If this situation weren't so awful, it would be funny," go with that thought. Let yourself chuckle at the pickle you're in. It will give you room to breathe, like surfacing after swimming underwater.

WHAT, ME WORRY? And let us not forget that most dependable source of laughter, ourselves. What are your faults? 'Bad temper? Being a perfectionist? A tendency to lose focus under pressure? A messy desk? Whining? Look at all the material for humor there.

Humor should never be a substitute for positive action or change, but there's nothing wrong with using it as a way to gain a little distance from the things that drive you crazy about yourself.