

Live Bait & Ammo #90: Bar Codes & Boondoggles, Slogans & Goals, Subliminal Messages & Robotic Control

In the course of a conversation between a supervisor, the bargaining chairman, the committeeman, and me, my supervisor said that she and I had to develop a more “trusting” relationship.

When I suppress a laugh, I burp. Excuse me.

I’ve worked for GM and Delphi for 28 years. Trust is not an issue because there is no trust. We have a contract. The company violates the contract and we contest. That is the nature of our relationship. There’s no cooperation. We have a purely adversarial relationship. The company pushes workers to do more for less and we push back.

In a capitalist society it’s inane to expect workers not to act like investors. We too seek the highest profit for the investment of our time, energy, and expertise. One thing you can count on in a capitalist society is that everyone wants the same thing: to buy low and sell high. Getting more for less is the basis of the capitalist ethic. We didn’t make the rule; we just work to rule.

The corporate hacks understand this motivation, which is why the competitive edge is pressed to our wrists. I say wrists because we are expected to do our own cutting. The company threatens to close the plant or outsource work if we don’t become more competitive. How do we become more competitive? By bleeding jobs.

We bleed jobs by speeding up the line, increasing the rates, ignoring hazards, two tiering new hires, and outsourcing jobs to non-union contractors who employ our brothers and sisters at lower rates of compensation. If we succeed in this competition, we lose everything but the right to work longer and harder and faster for less. Then for a perk, we get to vote on what we want to give up next. Before it’s over I expect we’ll have to make a decision: toilet paper or soap?

Every competitive program requires a slogan and the GM slogan of the year is: “Quality is job security.” It sounds good, but actions not slogans reveal one’s true intention.

I work in a GM warehouse. In my department, Order Selectors fill 47 orders per hour. They scavenge the shelves for parts, package and label them, and throw the packages into one of four bins depending on the type of shipment. It’s a lot to do in a short time.

Packages are regularly returned because they were thrown into the wrong bin. This is a chronic problem but management does not attempt error proofing, they engage in finger wagging. The finger wagging method has not proven effective as an instrument of change but the pantomime persists because the company is not really interested in quality as that might lead to job security. The real goal is to increase job insecurity, which compels more frantic competition.

The solution to misplaced packages is simple. We need a color code. Four primary colors would do the trick. Instead workers are expected to read bar codes. Scanners, not humans, were designed to read bar codes. Humans were designed to read Hebrew, Arabic, Egyptian hieroglyphics, or English, not Illiliilliliilll.

To the untrained eye all bar codes look the same, but there are differences. For example, some bar codes are fatter than others. Some are taller or thinner or shorter or longer or have other incremental variations. Attention to detail helps. But when you have 60 minutes to find, package, label, and dispose 47 different parts, you may miss a detail in favor of an expeditious toss over the left shoulder.

Management takes no responsibility for this chaos because “Quality is job security” and job security is not a GM goal. If quality was the goal each label would have a primary color— red green yellow blue —to designate the proper mode of transportation.

Besides reading bar codes the Order Selectors have to package the parts they scavenge from the maze of shelves and racks. Many of the packages require tape as opposed to self-stick flaps. Tape has a double value because it’s not only time consuming to apply, it’s harder than hell to remove. So we eat time on both ends—

shipping and receiving —and we carry razor knives, which makes everyone feel safer.

Some parts also require “over boxing” whereby one box is put over another box. Since one box has proven to be inadequate protection, we use two boxes and double the inadequacy, double the time, and double the effort. It’s a time honored GM policy: “If at first the plan doesn’t succeed, do it over and over and add red tape.” [See “Red Tag Sale” (by the way, is anyone in the marketing department aware that in manufacturing a red tag signifies scrap?)]

But there’s a good reason that the “over boxing” doesn’t protect “genuine GM parts” from damage because per management directive Order Selectors are required to throw them.

Heave may be a more accurate description. Some of these parts, say an alternator, are pretty heavy. Throw them six to ten feet and they crash. If they land on a 13 ounce plastic component, say a taillight, something has to give and the box and the bubble wrap give like a water balloon on impact. But management claims they can eat the cost of damages including the customer’s anger because they save money by eliminating a few jobs. You see, a more careful parts handling process might take more time, and since “Quality is job security” is a slogan not a goal, we are hell bent on destruction.

Another area of concern is selecting the wrong part or wrong quantity, which naturally makes one wonder: “What the hell are the bar codes for?”

Perhaps GM can’t afford the software. A bar code’s a boondoggle without the relevant software. If I had a computer at home like the ones they use in our warehouse, I would put it at the curb. I would put a sign on it that read, “FREE”. And I bet my paycheck no one would take it.

The prevalence of antiquated technology leads one to wonder if the front office isn’t sharing an abacus and a Ouija board.

When management wants to close a plant they stop investing, sabotage production, and blame workers for not being competitive. How do I know? I worked at Delphi.

But all is not lost. GM's Superbowl commercial featured a robot that was fired for dropping a screw. The robot was shamed and rejected by its peers. The robot's struggle to adjust to the world outside GM was hopeless. After a series of unskilled, low paying jobs the robot was filled with such loneliness and despair, it committed suicide.

But it was only a nightmare. The robot woke up on the assembly line anxious as hell and eager to please.

The unsophisticated viewer may think this skit has something to do with dehumanizing workers for the sake of quality control and hyper productivity, but insiders are aware that GM's CEO, Rick Wagoner, is known in official circles as "The Robot".

One more screw up and Rick Wagoner will make the ultimate sacrifice for the good of the company.

And you thought the subliminal message was "Quality is job security."

(sos, gregg shotwell)