

47th Storyworth: What Was Your Best Boss Like?

I have written often about Dick Coffin. I first met him when I had just completed my night classes in C programming at Onondaga Community College in 1991, which I decided to take because the job market was at a low point at the time, so upgrading skills was appropriate. At that moment I was only familiar with BASIC and FORTRAN programming, but neither was as good as C for the most general usage, and as a basis for learning graphical programming in C++, especially using “subroutine libraries”.

Where that mattered was that Dick had an already in progress project at GE Power, where he was a manager in their Decision Support Organization, or DSO. The project had planned to be the first implementation of RFID and Barcoding in the GE Power Warehousing Inventory. One need only consider the impact of a transposition error on any item there to realize the huge costs and risks for errors on parts which had upwards of two years turnaround to replace.

Anyway, Dick already had in place a contract with IBM to provide the equipment and linkages to the GE MRP system, which was their inventory and cost management system throughout, which was programmed in COBOL, about which I knew very little. But his existing Project Manager had just left for greener pastures with NY State, with about ¼ of the budget burned already on the project, which was to implement these controls into 13 sites located throughout the US.

Having no other project in hand at the time, I accepted the role to step in, despite the compensation being about 20% below my normal rate. It required me to be onsite in Schenectady, NY, so I arranged to live from my motorhome in a mobile home park in Scotia, a few miles north from the GE Plant, and to take weekend train rides home to my family in Liverpool, as there were Amtrak stations at each end.

One comment here; each of the 13 affected sites did things differently, and NONE were pleased with the idea of upsetting their way of doing things at all. But the information used for each was really the same, it was simply presented in their unique ways, which is one way to describe what is called a “User Interface”. The very first thing I did on taking the role was to read the contract with IBM, and I rapidly realized, and brought to Dick’s attention, that there were actually no deliverables stipulated in the contract; once IBM burned through the bank, GE could be stuck with NOTHING to show for it.

But with ¾ of the budget still to consume, and IBM wanting that, I convinced Dick to let me renegotiate the contract to require specific achievements and “handshake” data formation, and in trade I would take on the specific user interfaces for each of the sites personally using my programming skills concurrently, which had NEVER been contemplated in the original project, and could only be done because I just studied C and so would apply and learn C++ at the same time. The net result was that each site personnel could essentially do things in almost exactly the order with which they had previously done so, but they would use the PS/2 from IBM on standalone PCs linked to the COBOL MRP system using 3280 adaptive cards, all of which would happen in the background, and the users would be completely unaware of.

By the time the project budget had burned about ¾ of its total allocated, Dick could see it would eventually be completed according to original timeline and budget, but with the unexpected unique user interfaces at each site, which meant he would see WAY less pushback by those sites than had been anticipated, thereby making the success almost assured. So I mentioned to him again my having accepted below my usual rate to get the project, and despite his having told me that he could not change the budget, he promised to look at it. Three days later I got a call from a “Chris Trow”, who wanted to hire my services. (?)

It turned out that Chris was JUST starting a different project for Dick, so he had some budgetary flexibility, which Dick wanted to use to pay me the makeup. When I asked what job I was to perform, I was told by Chris I would have to “drop by for a beer periodically” and to sign some forms. And sure enough, I received the difference between my usual rate and what I had been forced to accept because I had no OTHER job to go to, including all retroactive back pay. From that day forward, when Dick said “sit” I have never looked for a chair.

Once I completed that project, with complete satisfaction by all affected parties, I went off to do other things like my TRW and Duracell efforts, interspersed with the nightmare in Chicago with FelPro, where they had lied to me about the political situation I would find there. So I’d been thrilled to go when I got the call from Victor, the Director of Packaging Engineering for Duracell, wanting to implement the conceptual design I developed for their Ultra Battery packages, and needed me to get to Brookville Indiana, to the J&J Packaging plant there, for a “come to Jesus meeting” because the prime vendor, Sencorp, did not believe they could meet the needed timeline Victor defined. And the VP at J&J, Mike O’Brien, had been surprised when Victor had suggested finding another Project Manager for that, and told Victor it made no sense whatsoever to change horses midstream. I still had to cajole the new President at Sencorp by dangling the \$40 million project value he’d lose if they DIDN’T decide to play along, and HE convinced his troops to compromise and do it MY way ;-). And yes, that project was a complete success; on time, in budget, despite WAY too much pushback by the captive Duracell plants because their accounting assigned too much overhead costs to machine downtime. But Victor decided to boost the budget by 10% and revise the plan so they could have their way. One of MANY reasons why J&J continued to take ever increasing amounts of their packaging business from the captives.

After another stint with TRW, to move a switch manufacturing operation from their Brantford ON plant to their Auburn NY one, I was again “free” to find alternative clients. Unfortunately, turnover at GE was so bad that none of those who had known of my prior work were there still, so I had called Dick Coffin to ask him to put in a good word for me. Instead, he told me he was running the Global Sourcing Quality Engineers for GE Power, and could use somebody who understood how to insure he got what was needed and could do so and bring solutions to Dick, instead of problems. But I’d need to be ready to travel globally at a moment’s notice, sometimes with elongated stays. By then Jess was 16 so her needs for my presence were more subdued. And that would also allow me to do career traveling I had never done outside North America.

One particular stint started the week after I did – I had to fly to Zurich, Switzerland, to inspect HV switchgear. I arrived on a Thursday, only to discover they did no work on weekends. So I was told to rent a normal GE car at Budget and enjoy the weekend. But first I took trains from my hotel in Oerlikon, near the ABB plant there, to Stuttgart in Germany, my first ever visit to the place where Porsches and M-B live. There I took a taxi and paid him \$100 to “show me the car places”, which was a hoot. Then I rented a BMW 528i Wagon and drove to Munich then further north to where someone I had met in Jamaica lived. Imagine you are tooling along on the highway and your car starts to misfire. I glance down and the car is bouncing on the rev limiter at 240 kmh, which is an honest 150 mph LEGALLY. Nice day!

That role also took me to much of Europe, which included a rented Opel Wagon in the Appenine Mountains of Italy, only to discover it was a diesel, which surprised the hell out of me, and showed me “trailing bag oversteer”, where my loose luggage would cause the car to slide through turns as my bags slammed against the inner walls, and I wore out the tires and smoked the brakes flying through the little villages there. I also went to Slovenia, Austria, France, Great Britain, and Berlin, where I was honored to be recognized for my merely being an American because the man had been a recipient of goodies from the “Candy Bomber” of the Berlin Airlift. Without a doubt, the best gig I ever encountered in my career, which I’d still be doing except ENRON collapsed and took my job with it in 2002. Then my divorce led to bankruptcy which ruined things for a LOT of years.

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