

At the office

BY LEE DUNN

Up until May of 1980, I had worked in a series of warehouses and factories, my duties consisting of gopher, grunt worker, shipper, machine operator, and clerk. The last couple of years in that stretch was with a large retailer, and, in their warehouse, I tried to advance my prospects by training myself to operate some of their motorized equipment such as forklifts and small electric tow trucks that pulled long lines of trailers laden with furniture.

I loved this work, and was thrilled that they let me do it, once they saw that I was a natural. In those days, training and licensing requirements weren't as they are now, and, if your boss saw that you were going to be an advantage, then you were ?in?. I made some good friends there, including an old Lithuanian gentleman whom I will never forget. Sadly, this particular wing of the company was eventually closed up, and we were all out of jobs.

We had had enough notice to allow us to look for work, pending the actual closure, and I happened to spot a newspaper ad that began with block letters ?FORKLIFT OPERATORS WITH A DIFFERENCE!? It was touting the arrival of a new company (yes, another warehouse) and promising immediate hires to successful applicants. You had to reply to a post office box, so I sat myself down and wrote something of a cover letter in fountain pen, if you can believe it. No computers at that time, and I did not have a typewriter, so I thought this would be a way to stand out amongst the mail I expected them to get. I got called for the interview, and the first thing my future boss said was ?You know, I kind of pulled this one out of the pile because of the way it was written.? His first question, which took me by surprise, was ?We are looking for a foreman. What would you think of filling that role?? It made me a little uncomfortable, but I responded by saying ?I'm sure I could do it, if given the opportunity to grow into the job. I am not one who could go around barking out orders to people.?

And so, I was hired, to be the supervisor of two youngsters that had been there for a couple of months and thought they knew everything there was to know about the business. They certainly knew more than I did, at the outset, and were blatantly rebellious to have anyone disturbing their daily routine. I was still wet behind the ears at this kind of thing, and let it go on longer than it should have, but, eventually tried to lead by example, bringing in some new ideas and innovations, gaining a little grudging acceptance, if not respect. They still looked upon me, however, as a straw boss, and thought they could get away with murder.

The older of the two was particularly upset, because he had been passed over for the job for which I had been hired. With the strain of increasingly busy daily operations, and a Mutiny on the Bounty situation developing with my huge crew of two, I thought I had better do something, and asked for a meeting with the regional manager, my boss Fred. I wanted to establish whether they were going to give me any actual authority over personnel, and of the way daily operations were to be run. Bear in mind that this was a new company, and many of us, including the bosses, were greenhorns in some respect.

The meeting with Fred was a vote of confidence I did not necessarily expect, and its success was due partly to two things, I think: Management was eager to get the day-to-day operations out of their hair, and, because of some the improvements that had come about, even during an obvious increase in business, I was seen as being worth the risk of shouldering additional responsibilities. Within a couple of days, I was informed, through Fred, that the hiring, discipline, and termination of staff was now my responsibility, as well as the design and layout of warehouse operations. I left his office with a light step, having secured what I needed, along with a new title and a raise.

Self doubt was nagging at me nonetheless, and this unexpected event had left me overwhelmed.

Immediately, I was given the go ahead to hire more staff, and had to learn how to be the personnel officer, trainer-in-chief, and disciplinarian. The hats were beginning to multiply. Time went on, along with more of the hats...approval of accounts payable, directing transportation logistics, sourcing of equipment, business flights to other company locations and suppliers.

My first foray into a serious personnel matter came when the disgruntled co-worker, whom I have mentioned earlier, had an incident

involving horseplay on company equipment, and disrespect of a fellow employee. I challenged him, brought him into my office, and said I was sending him home for the day. He said "Why don't you just fire me?", so I did. This is never pleasant, but, in this case, it was necessary, to show what would and would not be tolerated, and also that I would actually do the deed. There were other occasions where I needed to make these decisions, and I have had grown men cry in my office. Not the best feeling to take home with you.

Through the thirteen years that I was there, we moved our business to two successively larger locations, and our staff and equipment grew accordingly. It was necessary to go to two shifts, for which I had to appoint lead hands, both of which are still with the company 25 years later, and one of whom took over my job.

I had many people through my office, some hired from all different nationalities, including one who we found out was working under an assumed name, being an illegal immigrant who was waiting on papers. He came to me himself with this information, so we went to bat for him, and he eventually got his social insurance number, was able to use his real name, and stayed on with us. By this time, we had a staff of 40. Being so busy with paperwork, phone calls, and all else, I was moved to the front office and was now in a suit and tie.

This was a new world, although I knew each of the people. I got to know the relationships and dynamics of the place, and grew to have a special affection for some of those people. There was Dorothy (regional secretary), who became known, unkindly, as Dorothy from OZ, because of her quirky personality. I went along with the joke until she asked me for a private meeting, during which she wept and told me she was Manic Depressive and didn't know what to do. She hugged me, and I learned to treat her with more respect after that. She liked my whistling, and secretly tape recorded it.

There was Jane, who, by all accounts, was a bona fide Witch, being of the Wiccan persuasion. She had a particular distaste for Bob, one of our salesmen, who would utter sarcastic barbs to her whenever he had the chance. One December, he said "So, what are you doing for Christmas, Jane? Having a Sacrifice?" The look in her eyes was frightening, and she made some sort of sign at him.

There was Janine, an older woman with whom I got along very well. I fixed her car one day in the parking lot, and found a note on my desk saying "thank you for doing this, and for your grace". I still have it.

There was Richard, one of our sales managers. Whenever I saw him in the office, he appeared to be alternately looking off into space, or gazing into a crystal paperweight that he rotated in front of his face. He was gone in due course.

There was my boss, Fred, who I think was having difficulties in his position of Regional Manager. Many times, he would come out in the warehouse and show people how to sweep the floors, for example, and pick away at some trivial thing one of the employees was doing. It had been his decision to move me to the office, and he was worried that he would have to answer for it.

There was Beatrice, the office clerk, a woman who was in her mid 40's, and was an alcoholic. I was a little afraid of her. Her eyes were like a shark's, the soul very far away.

There was a girl named Lee. She had the most beautiful and quirky handwriting I have ever seen. It looked like a foreign language until you paid attention. She was a fashion rebel, and, since those days, I swear she was a trendsetter.

Most of all, there was Joan, a capable and pleasant woman who was Head Office representative at our location. She technically worked for them, but still just had the title of secretary. She was sharply aware of the glass ceiling between the sexes, and felt she was unrecognized for her contributions. We heard, through our connected grapevine, that she had asked for, and was granted, an audience with the company President, during which she itemized all of her responsibilities, and had the guts to demand appropriate compensation and title. When he refused, she lifted up her skirt to expose a strapped-on item, obviously of the male variety, and said "Now will you hire me?" It was not long before she left the company "voluntarily".

My turn finally came after a period of serious inventory problems, for which I had not found a solution, and a spate of accidents

involving property and equipment damage. A month after my 13th anniversary, I was let go.

This I will always think of as my ?career?, although afterwards I held two more jobs totaling 23 years. Proud that I started with a company at ground zero and helped to bring it forward. Not so proud of my failings. Blessed for meeting many of the people, some of whom I remember with love to this day.

True story.