

BY JAMES COLLINS

I walked into the office of the Director of Engineering, 'Big Joe' Grimes in time for my appointment. As engineering manager for Avionics Ground Support Equipment (AGE), he was my direct supervisor. I told him I had something I wanted to tell him, which, in my estimation was quite sensitive. He told me to close the door.

Then I described a problem on the manufacturing floor that had started with manufacturing engineering changing a process on a key item that our department had designed. Now quality control was rejecting large numbers of these key items because they would not pass part of the acceptance test procedure (ATP). I had investigated the problem on my own and located the cause but to correct the problem I would need to cross department lines and I would need his support.

“Does anybody else know about this problem?”

“No, I discovered on my own just walking around the factory floor and looking at the rejects in the test department. Since we designed this assembly and sent the approved prototypes down to the floor, I knew all the aspects of manufacture. I noticed the order of assembly for one key element had been changed and is causing the problem.”

“Is it expensive to fix the problem?”

“Not at present. There are only a couple of a dozen units involved and with a few people it would take about a week to straighten out the line. However, the longer we wait, the more expensive it is going to be and those rejects are going to back up. Eventually it will shut down the manufacturing line for that product.”

“If you fix the problem now, will anybody know what you did or how important it was, and will engineering get any credit?”

“No, somebody may know we messed around down there and made a change. Since engineering makes changes on a daily basis, nobody will understand the significance.”

“Will we pick up any blame if the production line jams up?”

“No, we have nothing to do with it. The problem will lie with Manufacturing Engineering and Quality. The powers above will have to work out who is the culprit. Will it be Manufacturing Engineering who made a change that was unauthorized or Quality who didn't catch the change and now are rejecting in the testing phase.”

“How bad will the problem become if we just let it develop?”

“All hell will break out! That entire product line will shut down. Production will stop, and billings for that line will stop. The controller, the general manager and all the vice president’s will be tasked to fix the problem.”

“Will you still be able to fix the problem at that time?”

“Definitely, but it will cost a lot more take a lot more time and leave blood on the floor. Everybody will be pointing fingers and blaming everybody else. ”

“Will we take any blame at that time?”

“No we will probably be recognized as heroes. But we will have spent an awful lot of money that we could avoid if I fix the problem now.”

“We get no credit if you fix the problem now, and nobody knows about us diverting a major disaster. However if we do nothing, we take no blame but the problem gets worse and worse. When it becomes a disaster, they are going to be screaming for a solution. You claim that you can still fix it at that time correct?”

“I can fix it now. I can fix it later. Of course, it costs a lot more later.”

“Jim, listen to me very carefully. You are not to tell anyone about this problem! Nobody in the office and none of your subordinates are to hear about it. You will monitor what is going on down there and let me know the status every day. Once this develops, as you predict, into a disaster, I will wait for the first major vice president and director meeting called on this event. I will offer engineering help to examine the problem and identify the cause. I will identify you as my prime investigator and tell the CEO that I am sure you will be able to handle this problem. We will talk each day and drag this out about three weeks. At that point, you will make a major presentation to all the Vice Presidents and Directors identifying the cause and presenting the solution. They will jump at this and do anything to get it under control. I will identify you to head up a Tiger team and get you all the resources of the company needed to fix the problem. How long do you think it will take?”

“The lead time for the assembly is about 12 weeks. They have about 160 pieces rejected with more arriving every day. Each assembly will have to be disassembled the questionable part removed recycled through the correct order of treatment and reinstalled. Then they must undergo retest. We will have to set up a small production line dedicated to this task. Within two weeks, we will have the product line moving and billings reinstated. And by six weeks we should be fully recovered.”

“Okay that’s our plan. Do not tell anyone about this discussion. Wait until the problem develops and then we will follow your plan.”

By the end of the month, production units backed up and billings ceased. The CEO declared an emergency and the high-level meetings began. Big Joe followed the plan. I headed up the Tiger team, identified and solved the problem. Joe's department was heroic and Joe got a promotion and a major bonus. I also received a promotion and a very substantial bonus. Apparently, at the higher levels self-aggrandizement is more important than truth and hard work.

THE END