

SWEET PEA

By James Collins

Sid 'Sweet Pea' Goldberg was a brilliant engineer. However, he had many eccentricities. He was wedded to an old topcoat he had worn at college, which he obtained from someone slightly taller. He stood about 5 foot 2, and the coat hung about 4 foot 10. At times the coat hem rubbed on the ground and he looked like the Popeye comic strip character, 'Sweet Pea' hence his nickname. Sid really believed he was 6'2" tall and had an attitude to go along with this misconception. He disliked Herb the engineer who sat on his immediate left, tried to pick fights with Herb and had the bruises to prove it. Sid was also allergic to smoke of any kind, which was a major cause of confrontation in a period when many smoked.

Sitting next to Sid was Herb West a very large, cigar smoking, World War II veteran who was also an excellent engineer. On a daily basis, Herb would light up a cigar and eventually the smoke would drift toward Sid. Immediately a confrontation was under way for the rest of the day. Sid worked out a countermeasure. He obtained a small muffin fan which he plugged into the AC outlet and directed its airflow to blow the smoke back into Herb's face. The war escalated. Mike, the group manager, asked me to fix the problem. I got the rest of the group together one afternoon when both Sid and Herb were out at lunch. We discussed the problem and reviewed the various episodes. All agreed that Sid was the instigator and the cause of most of the problems. We decided to support Herb and bring him into our little conspiracy. When Herb came back from lunch, we briefed him and decided that the next day we would put our plan in action.

We took an autotransformer out of the electrical lab and hooked it up to the power cord for Sid's muffin fan. Now at will, we could vary the speed of the fan. In addition, we took a small resistor and wired it across the AC input of the fan. We were ready for the exercise. Sid came in early, as usual; Herb came in at his usual time and lit up a cigar. Sid threw a hissy fit, picked up his muffin fan, and aimed it at Herb. All appeared normal. I had the autotransformer under my desk and slowly decreased the amount of energy fed to the fan. The fan slowed down; it stopped forcing the smoke back and Sid started to get agitated.

On cue, I looked up at the lights and said, "Why are the lights dimming?"

"Yeah, I've noticed that too what's going on?" asked Eddie.

Each of the conspirators in turn talked about the light dimming as I adjusted the auto transform up and down and the muffin fan speed varied in concert. Sid was really getting spooked. He decided to call maintenance and yell at them for not maintaining the AC value in the building. They checked all the gauges and told him he was crazy. He was getting furious. He could tell by the muffin fan in his hand that the AC was changing. His paranoia, coupled with the fact that all of the people in the office agreed the lights were dimming, further reinforced the idea that the problem was with maintenance. He kept yelling; they kept defending themselves and we decided it was time to pull the plug. I increased the autotransformer output so that the amount of energy would destroy the resistor we had wired in place.

It went off with a small explosion and a lot of smoke. Sid dropped the fan and dove for the door. We were all in hysterics, eventually briefed him on the trick and pointed out his overreaction. Sid calmed down and apologized to Herb. We got the whole office together and agreed upon shifting desks. Herb was now in a far corner where he could smoke, without affecting anyone and Sid was in a separate corner where the cigar smoke did not reach him. Peace settled on the office staff.

CHECKPOINT CHARLIE

A few months later someone in management decided that the hourly employees were taking too long for their coffee break. Problems with the union negotiations initiated this concern. All employees, union and nonunion, were entitled to a 20 min. coffee break in the cafeteria. As always happens some took advantage of this and extended their breaks out to an hour. Management retaliated by placing a desk and two security guards at the overhead corridor that connected the two buildings. Manufacturing and engineering was in one building, cafeteria and management was in the other. All manufacturing staff and engineering had to cross this barrier to get to the cafeteria for coffee. Now, at a portable table, each person was stopped, their badge checked and both badge number and name entered into a list with the time that they arrived at the desk. With over 100 people at each coffee break, the lines were enormous. When their break was over they had to return to the desk, and again they went through this process, verifying their badge number and the time. The engineers were not constrained by this 20 min. window because they worked additional 5 to 10 hours a week without pay, but they were quite agitated because of the delay in getting the job done. They knew this time would be added to their workload at the end of the week. No one was more incensed than Sid. He decided to take it up a notch. Sid created a large 3' x 3' sign and wrote the words 'Checkpoint Charlie' in 4 inch high letters using broad black strokes. Checkpoint Charlie was the notorious crossing at East Berlin between the Russian and the American zones, which was a hot spot in Europe at that time. Sid put the sign at the entrance to the corridor on the engineering side of the building. Everyone going to the desk for sign in saw the sign before they got there. By the time they lined up, they were all in stitches laughing. Security wanted to know what was so funny. All the people in the line were happy to tell them. Security found the sign and took it to management. That day checkpoint Charlie went away never to be seen again.

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