

The Toolbox by David K. Taylor, C.P.M. November 2006
Taking Time to Reflect—and Enjoy the Mirror Image! – Reflections on words vs. action.

As I write this, it is Thanksgiving weekend. Like many of my fellow colleagues in the Supply Chain profession, I like many of you have been on a dead run so to speak to get everything done. Though the media says our economy is shaky, many of you would say quite to the contrary, with the exception of automotive and some other pockets of market sluggishness. Overall, most distributors and manufacturers are indeed busy beyond anything which they had anticipated.

Many of us work in Lean Office situations or environments. To clarify that acronym, in “realistic speak”, it too often means “doing more and more with less and less until you burn out or cease to be productive”. I have worked in many situations office-wise, that were less than ideal, with old or antiquated equipment and software, lack of help, lack of support from supervision, lack of a plan for your back-up during vacations or sickness and so on. I have experienced burn-out at least once in my career over 15 years ago. Unfortunately I have come close to burn out on two other occasions in my career that I can recognize, but each time I got a respite before I reached the brink.

This month has been one of those times—I was reaching the end of my rope, my tank was on empty, I had no more to give and I had very little fight left within me. In addition to being extremely busy at work, there has been much to do at home and my help has been needed as two of our sons moved-in with their older brother to share a house. I needed to stand back, take stock and see where I was.

Regardless of your schedule, there still must be time for you and your significant other, (in my case my wife), and most importantly, you must take time for yourself. That is one thing that is a must in your Toolbox—the skill in knowing when and how to relax. Time-out for just you is mandatory to maintain your physical and mental health. It is your reality check, mental health, re-fueling whatever you must call it. A half hour ago, I drove up to *the Trading Post*, the local grocery & necessities store, which services our small rural, backwoods community, 55 miles from Gaylord. My hobby is photography. As a result, I can look at many situations as thru the lense of the camera for the bird’s eye view. Today is overcast, but extremely calm, with no breeze, and a peaceful stillness you seldom can enjoy. I had the wonderful opportunity to drive by three small lakes on the resort property along the route to the store. All three lakes provided a KODAK moment—a picture perfect view-- of a mirror-like lake surface, perfectly reflecting everything above the water line in an inverted mirror image below the water line. True to my obsession, my camera was with me in the car, and I took the time to stop at each of the three lakes to snap a picture of each perfect view. Three separate lakes, three separate scenes all in less than a mile of road. Do you ever just pull over and stop, get out of the car and just take in the view and beauty? You have to do so, every once in a while. If you don’t, too much passes you by without notice. Photography reminds me of the simpler things that we take for granted but they are gone in the blink of an eye.

Wednesday evening, I pulled my parents slide projector off the shelf in the basement. In boxes beside the projector were plastic tray/film magazines of 35mm slides taken during the happiest years of their life from the 60’s to the 70’s when much of what they did was with their vast array of life-long friends. Hidden in one of the boxes were several slide magazines which my father (now deceased) took on a fishing expedition to God’s River, Manitoba. He took the trip with his own father who was an avid

outdoorsman. Amongst the various slides of pristine lakes & channels with Indian guides and huge trout and walleye pike, were a few sunsets that my father photographed of the northern Canadian wilderness in its barren beauty. It was breathtaking and for that moment, I experienced thru my father's photos what he was viewing and seeing thru his camera shutter.

How seldom do we stop, look around or even take stock of what or why we are doing what we do? I am finding I must re-learn how to take a truly enjoyable vacation and not do work while I am away from the office.

A week ago, three of us conducted a supplier quality audit of a potential supplier. The outcome of the trip was disappointing and yet very surprising. The company by all outward appearances seemed to be a growing enterprise with quality as a main-stay and buzzword within their organization. Facilities were modern, well-kept, and equipment though sometimes old, was regularly rebuilt to meet their production standards. It appeared on paper an ideal match for our need for a quality conscious supplier to add to our supply base. In the final analysis, what was lacking was a corporate culture of quality. They spoke it, used the buzz-words and spoke boastfully of their "kaizen" events. They did not walk it or live it. For all their measureables, bar graphs and charts, they could not predict when a process was deteriorating and becoming less capable. They had no clue whether a machine was capable on all six spindles or just one. They had no audit trail on statistical data from their shop floor on daily production. They waited until they got feedback from their customers that they had a problem. By then it was too late. So, we drove away from the company and the potential of starting off with a ¼ to half million dollars worth of business for next year. It was a lost opportunity because the company management team did not really believe in quality as a daily way of life from the top on down thru the organizational levels. They treated quality as just another list of product options—to provide quality level C, would be an additional cost. If you wanted level B that would add-on even more cost. Should you want Level A quality, well--they would have to discuss if they could meet that level and that definitely would cost even more than level B.

During our trip home from the supplier audit, our discussion centered on how our company and the one we visited seemed from two different worlds of reference. It was hard to believe they currently manufactured the very part we currently buy from two other sources. It is a standard part but as we found, quality varies drastically from one manufacturer to the next. And so, our search continues next week with visits to three other suppliers, two who are currently suppliers and another who is another potential new source.

Lesson from the tool box:

- be true to your words, make your walk match your talk.
- Periodically review where you are
- if you are off-course, make necessary corrections.
- Adjust to changing variables and conditions and winds of change in your market.
- Know how to read the signs given you.
- Be observant, take time to step back and take it all in.
- You might be pleased, in awe or in shock at what you will actually see.
- The final test is how you respond with the new information or image, moving forward.

Note: "I took the following 4 mirror image photos within a five minute period one evening, in Oct. 2006, the 3 lakes are within a 1/2 mile of each other on the same road near Atlanta MI. Taken around 6:30pm, calm overcast evening 1/125 sec F6 setting, with a Mamiya/Secor 1000DTL--dt"



