

Productive

Over a lifetime of work, I came to believe the workplace was no more than a great many people who accomplished often useless tasks in the dumbest way possible. I once estimated the actual number of workers making any real progress toward our stated goals in the company I worked for might amount to no more than thirty-three percent. We succeeded because the Golden Third were wildly successful and carried the rest of us over the goal line.

These folks had a unique insight into our purpose and they kept a steady eye on the goal, while the rest of us churned down paths that were often led to dead ends. We repeated tasks day after day because they were more pleasant than useful. We were convinced we must be doing something right because upper management had not turned off the overhead lights in our offices and paychecks still arrived on a regular basis.

Struck by the simple logic that I might discover what the Magnificent Third knew that I didn't, I resolved to seek out a representative of their cohort and study how I might improve my productivity. Someday, I mused, I might sit among the elders in the great hall of labor, having actually contributed to the company's fortunes instead of draining its resources.

Our technology company consisted of a campus of tall buildings. I ordered my assistant to send me the top worker in our building. Then I took an extended lunch hour to fortify myself for all the successes I could expect in the years ahead.

When I returned, a middle-aged gentleman in jeans waited for me.

"So you're one of the Ineffable Third, I'm told."

"I'm Rodney and you could say I know what I'm doing, yes," he said.

"And how do you know that?" I asked.

"Because I understand my job description, have a checklist to operate from and measure myself on how close I come to the goals."

"You don't ever waver?" I said. "Get tired, misplace the memo that changed our target date while you were away on vacation or lose your Ebenezer?" I asked.

His brow rose. "My what?"

"Your Ebenezer," I said. "Our company's flag on the battlefield.

"My company's flag a hundred years ago, maybe," he said.

I nodded. "I admit it's an old term, but it has tremendous symbolic meaning."

"That's nice," he said. "Anyway ... I try to keep in mind that as a professional, I have to anticipate many eventualities."

I stood and walked to my white board, ready to write down his advice. "So what is the secret of your productivity?"

He shrugged. "Well, I keep up with the literature and the parts catalogs."

That seemed a bit mundane, so I offered a second query. "What's the biggest problem you find dogging your steps as you run your race toward success?"

"Finding the right metrics to measure with," Rodney said, as a look of consternation crossed his brow.

"Do you mean for example figuring out if your goals are measured in lost dreams or opportunities uncovered?"

"No, I mean inches or centimeters."

"Inches or--" I said.

He sighed loudly. "Inches or centimeters. Half the pipe that gets delivered here is measured in centimeters."

"Pipe? How does that --"

"Yes, pipe," he answered. "And I can't perform the most important job in the building with the wrong ruler."

"What is it that you do?" I asked, now completely intrigued.

"I'm the plumber. I keep the toilets running," he said.

That was surely a lesson for me. While I wove together big ideas for the next monumental breakthrough in technology ... lofted high on wings of narcissism, a little prayer and a lot of vainglory ... the most important job in the organization was down in the ... uh ... bowels of the building making sure the remnants of lunch and 1500 cups of coffee daily wound up where all of it was supposed to go.

All I could think to say was, "You must be flushed with pride."

When he left I wondered where I had put my Ebenezer. I wanted to mount it on my desk, because it looked so energetic and spirited. *Dashing* we would have said a hundred years ago.

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