

## You Can Always Torch It!

I know an engineer, Carl, who is one hard worker and brings a lot of ambition and determination to any project he is working on. To give you an idea just how determined he can be,



consider one weekend he was consumed at work. He just had to ship a particular prototype on Monday. To his dismay, the stockroom was the only source of a particular electrolytic capacitor he needed. Nobody around had the key to the stockroom; nobody was

available by telephone; and the stockroom was guarded by a thick, iron gate. Obviously, the only solution was to take an acetylene torch and burn the gate's hinges off of the doorjamb. As you can imagine, the stockroom clerk and his supervisors were really shocked come Monday morning. Word of what Carl had done spread throughout the company as everyone wondered what was going to happen. What is really interesting is the company president's reaction to the event. He came into Carl's office, heard about the now-working prototype, and handed Carl a key to the stockroom. He also gave Carl a vacation and a raise.

When I heard this story, I was struck by the fact that Carl had the guts to actually burn the door off. I was further impressed by the reaction of the employer. An analysis of the elements to this story reveals the following:

- ▶ Carl must have been working on something really important.

- ▶ The company also knew it was important.
- ▶ Carl sensed that the goal of getting the product out was more important than following protocol.

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(Burning doors off hinges isn't protocol in most companies.)

- ▶ The company realized that Carl needed to be empowered without having obstacles get in the way of project completion.
- ▶ The company realized that such end-goal devotion should be rewarded rather than criticized. Hence, they gave Carl the vacation and raise.
- ▶ An example was set for the rest of the company.

It makes me wonder if companies realize just how many obstacles they put in the way of their engineering

teams. It seems to me that, almost everywhere, I see organizations where engineers create ad hoc procedures for getting around the company procedures or where engineering teams do not have the equipment to carry out a particular task or measurement.

Why is this an important issue? Because America is starting to realize that our productivity gains are what is fueling economic recovery, and it is the ability to be productive in engineering design that allows America to compete with foreign sources. The culture, beauracracies, and outdated infrastructures of Americas' competitors allows for American companies to bring new products and technologies to market more efficiently.

However, these advantages will not last forever, especially as American methods and tools are outsourced. We had better maintain productivity and continue to enhance productivity methods to remain competitive. We had better not put up iron gates to slow down the operation. And when the gates are up, I hope we have a lot of engineers like Carl who are ready to torch it to make something happen and employers who are ready to reward those who do.

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