

In My Opinion...

Dean Says:

Upholding A Standard Of Excellence



Charlene Kiefer

By the time we completed the long drive back to Toronto from the north country, I imagine the frame of the back of the front seat of the car had a permanent bend. You see I had watched, mile after mile, from the vantage point of the car behind, while the manager of industry and government relations for the large multinational fire alarm company pounded the back of the front seat with his clenched fist. I remember thinking how very uncharacteristic this was for a man who had a reputation for being a truly cool dude.

The occasion for this lengthy emotional outburst followed hard on the heels of a visit to a large distillery. In the warehouse, oak casks of the sweet smelling Canadian whiskey lay stacked many barrels high.

The plant had invested almost a million dollars in a new fire alarm system 8 months before. They had suffered through the inconvenience of the installation. They had endured the shake down period. They had expended effort to make certain all their key personnel received training on how to use the new

system. They hoped to gain tremendous advantage from the state-of-the-art technology the system introduced.

Sadly, it was not to be. Rather they had experienced disruption after disruption caused by malfunctions and false alarms. They had replaced the main computer that operated the system no less than seven times. They had watched service man after service man come up from Toronto and go away, always with a shake of his head.

When the representative from the property insurance company came by to conduct a loss prevention survey, they showed the engineer box after box of parts that had been replaced. They took her out into the plant and showed her location after location where some type of temporary connection had been made to try to keep the system up and running.

The more she saw, the more concerned she became. After touring the perimeter of the plant to observe a maintenance worker spring test the sprinkler system post indicator valves, she asked the plant manager if he minded if she took some photos of the alarm system installation.

During lunch, she called me in my Hartford office. "Mr. Wilson," she sighed over the long distance wires, "you are simply not going to believe what they've done."

"They" was a multinational alarm company—known far and wide as one of the best in the business—often first on the street with the most jazzy new tech-

nology—prompt, efficient, professional in every aspect of their service business. How could this be? How could "they" have completed a fire alarm installation in such a manner that an insurance field engineer would want to document it by taking not one, not two, not three, but four rolls of photos.

When the photos arrived in Hartford, I simply couldn't believe it. Even now, I can barely find the words to describe to you the hilarity these photos evoked.

If you imagined a work crew who had never seen a fire alarm system before, took it out of boxes and installed as best they could using materials they found at a local pennysaver store, you would still be somewhat removed from the reality of this installation.

I immediately contacted the manager of industry and government relations at the corporate headquarters of the alarm company. I sent him the photos. He called me back to say, "This simply cannot be!"

So here we were riding south on a Canadian highway. The manager in the car ahead pounded the back of the front seat over and over and over again. His companions, the local management team from the Toronto office. He had corralled them and forced them to accompany him north to the plant site.

To this day, I still do not know what went wrong. Here was a company that had detailed, written installation procedures. They had created literal standards by which all company operations were conducted. These standards were taught to all personnel with strict determination, and they were rigorously enforced through quality audit teams.

And yet, someone had not held to the standard. The result was a customer so dissatisfied that it would be unlikely if they would ever be content with their new fire alarm system.

The moral of the story seems clear: no matter how great you are, to remain great you must firmly hold to a standard of excellence and keep holding, and keep holding, and keep holding, and keep holding. Maintaining success truly becomes a full time occupation. □

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Page 14

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