

The Balance of Profit and Sustenance in an Organization

By TK Cheng



If you follow the news about SMRT, you would find much information about how that day of unexpected delays happened. Having spoken to friends who work in SMRT, the picture they painted wasn't pretty, no doubt the trains would hit a point of critical mass. This inspired a story, one about SAW-ing too, well sawing trees that is.

There was once a lumberjack who provided firewood to the neighboring villages. He had a small little cottage in the woods and a few helping hands who diligently worked for him. His father had tended to the forest, so did his father's father and so will his son, Peter. Being the loving father that he is, he wanted the best for his son and sent his son around the kingdom for an education.

Peter was exposed to the world and was very fascinated with everything sparkling and new. He was amazed at how fast the rest of the world was compared to his tiny little cottage in the forest. Through his travels an idea formed and brewed, one that would definitely make his father proud.

After a few years of traveling around the region, Peter finally returned. He approached his father with his new ideas and they were received with a warm smile. His father listened intently and nodded in approval. "Take my axe," said the old lumberjack.

With his ideas set into action, he became a very busy man. He got himself brand new chainsaws, bulldozers and all kinds of strong looking machinery from the friends he met around the kingdom. He sent out fliers for workers and employed a whole lot more workers. Peter was turning his quiet forest into a booming business.

All his plans worked, money was flowing in and so were contracts. As the years went by, his business got better and better. He wanted more. It was all not enough. He did his mathematics and an idea struck him. His best ever

idea. He took the idea to his father but his father only frowned. Old ideas need to make way for newer ones, thought Peter to himself and he ignored his father's objection.

So one day he walked amongst his workers and selectively handed out envelopes. You see, these envelopes contained letters of goodbye. He realized that he could hire stronger workers who were younger, faster and cheaper. All of his dad's workers were sent home. He started to hire workers based on how strong they were.

True enough, his business doubled! Peter wagged his success in front of his father but the old lumberjack merely shook his head.

Ten years passed and Peter was highly successful. The old lumberjack watched his son's growth and frowned for he knew better. Success to him was not measured by wealth. Within that year, his workers reported to him a problem: the forest was shrinking. It wasn't because the trees were not growing fast enough, but somehow usable land was growing more and more scarce. He sought desperately to solve the problem yet none of his workers could help him. They had never encountered such a situation before!

By the end of the year, the company's productivity had dropped to only half of the previous year's produce. By the end of the following year, the company was in debt. He needed guidance. He swallowed his pride and approached his father for help.

The old lumberjack looked at his son and sighed. This was what he predicted ten years ago. Being a lumberjack wasn't just about chopping down trees faster. It was about maintaining the balance in the ecosystem and most of all allowing the forest to thrive. Being a lumberjack was never about felling trees only; A true lumberjack was also the guardian of the forest. Peter had over harvested the forest and the land was not given enough time to rest. Without the experience of the older workers, there was no one who could warn Peter of this impending problem over the course of the years. He couldn't see that his actions were harming the forest and not protecting it because he was blinded by ambition. The old lumberjack knew what needed to be done.

In this story who was to err?

Was it Peter for his ambition and greed? No doubt he was greedy and wanted more, but he did bring the company to greater heights and provided his family with abundance.

Or was it the old lumberjack's fault for not stopping his son when he saw what was coming ? He wanted to give his son a chance to take over the company and giving him a chance means allowing him to take full responsibility, for all its successes and failures too isn't it?

We often find this problem in organizations and in our own daily lives. Just to meet targets and achieve instant results, we use instant methods. Yet in many things in life, instant results may result in instant failure. There are so many examples of companies who seek maximum profits and start laying off their senior staff but they didn't realize that its not the paychecks that they were cutting out, its the wealth of knowledge and experience contained in these people that is cut out. Then again, at what point do we decide that old methodology is outdated? On a personal level, we may make the mistake of taking shortcuts just to reach our targets faster. Just think about it, weren't there times in your life when you chose to take the shorter route and it turned out to cause more trouble for you? An important idiom to remember: Rome wasn't built in a day; so let's start brick by brick.