

C'mere, Kid!

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**"Forget that you could hear his advice two zip codes away.
I was happy; My God, I was getting real experience!"**

Being alone as a new manager without the help of experienced senior guidance can be frightening to say the least! Today, young people who are trying to master management positions in maintenance have two things in common:

a) On average, they are 12 years younger than their predecessor was when he/she got the job, people with little, if any, managerial experience, and b) they are not getting enough native guidance or training from their seniors in mastering these positions. To senior management, an inexperienced cadre brings back remembrances of nightmares past. However, finding that the new managerial personnel filling these positions are in effect, amateurs, doesn't mean the end of the world is near, not if they have mentors! I'm personally sensitive to their plight, for reasons opposite to those you might expect.

Between 1975 and 2002 a subtle but most serious change will have taken place in this nation. Over 94% of operating management in both the processes and facilities will have retired for one reason or another. They range in title from Vice President of Operations to First-line Supervisors. Many have left their positions, almost without notice, due to the sudden appearance of corporate offers of voluntary early retirement that "Cannot be refused," or from downsizing itself. The original purpose of the early retirement program was to reduce the population of dead/dying wood on staff. However, many corporations were surprised when a large number of truly valuable people also took them up on "The Golden Parachute." That hemorrhaging of mentoring competence coincided with the beginning of this nation's having problems with being a competitive force in the world marketplace. As it turns out, the "Stumps as far as the eye can see" policy of indiscriminate personnel cutting, is the opposite of modern people farming. Too late, is the realization of the importance of corporate competence crop management.

We've heard all the stories about retirees who are brought back into their former organizations as "Consultants." These people provide needed technical assistance and emergency back-up to the plant that has retired them prematurely, but few if any organizations use these people to provide needed education to the new, younger cadre! Initially, the organizations that bring retirees back into the plant should think as much about the potential role of that person as a near-term transplantor of his or her "Learning curve" as they do of an expedient source of needed technical assistance. This is especially true where untimely conditions brought about by early retirement programs interfered with that person's availability for a sufficient period to train either a successor or an entire department for that matter. Your younger plant personnel need a brain to pick, and someone to guide them, much more than they need performance evaluations by outsiders. Reducing personnel learning curve at all levels of the corporation is a national priority. It is where the next efforts to raise profits should be directed.

My Story: I remember my first few days as an IBM trainee; the hours spent studying alone in the branch conference room, trying to make sense out of 3 stacks of programmed instruction texts that seemed as formidable to me as Mount Everest. At the time, IBM had two generations of programmable computers, and an older third generation of punch card equipment (which you wired), so I had to learn the operation and programming of three species of equipment. Worse yet, they expected you to learn how to program and operate equipment which was not available often for you to test your knowledge on, owing to the fact that branch systems used for customer production were rarely available to trainees. However, it was up to you to get the "hands-on" experience of programming and wiring before being sent to the corporate schools - or risk showing up at the school with no physical knowledge of what was going on.

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Needless to say, the production people in the computer room were always extremely happy to see the next "College boy" trainee taking up their valuable machine time "for non-billable purposes" to test what he had learned in conference room study. I'll omit the description of the fair and equitable treatment that I received from them. With perseverance however, I started to get the necessary experience. The second week of my IBM career was to be special for me, as I would later find out. One day as I was studying, the conference room door opened just a crack, and a truly ugly looking man stuck his head in the room and said "Hey, kid! You the new trainee?" I acknowledged his question and received the reply: "You want to learn something, or what?" Not to knock anyone's line of work, but at that moment, this diamond, this loud-mouthed fellow definitely had the words **MAIL ROOM SUPERVISOR** stamped on his forehead exclusively for me to see - or so my young mind deduced. Boy, was I wrong! However, an offer is an offer, so I said "Sure!" He replied "Well, what are you waiting for.....C'mere, kid!"

His name was Art Palaci. He was in his mid-sixties, and although nature had seen fit to design the front of his mouth for eating and the side for talking, he was dynamite! He took me to a sorter in the machine room where he literally had over one million tab cards. "Hey, Kid, get on that sorter and sort these fields." I repeated his instructions, got the affirming nod, and started to work. Within a minute of watching me, he came over and offered a few constructive suggestions that tripled my efficiency. Forget that you could hear his advice two zip codes away. I was happy; my God, I was getting real experience!

Art must have either liked my work, or the unwritten offer of having his own personal "College-boy trainee-slave" was too good to pass up. At any rate, when the sorting job was finished, he showed me how to wire and use the collator to check the sequence of cards that I had just sorted. Later on that day, during another sorting job, he showed me how to block sort the cards and then sort and sequence check them at the same time. I was in heaven. The next day as I was sitting in the conference room studying, Art opened the conference room door just a crack, stuck his head in the room and said, "Hey, kid! You want to learn something, or what?" Now my reply was "Of course Art, what do you need me for?" His answer: "Well, what are you waiting for.....C'mere kid." And so it went.

I received more and more experience with different machines, and worked longer and harder hours in the machine room. This meant my conference study hours were done at night - late at night. It was a fair exchange: Art had his slave and I was getting a practical education. I did make one mistake with Art, but one that he never discovered. I started to rationalize that perhaps I was spending too much time in the machine room, and that it would affect my studies. On that count, I shouldn't have worried, and by now you have all guessed why.

I started to notice that as I went from specific machine technical manual to manual, the reading was moving much faster. At this point, the manuals truly had little to teach me about block sorting and collator wiring. Very little to teach, one week after Art had shown me the ropes! My rationalization now became arrogance, which of course I kept to myself. Within five weeks Art introduced me to Les Drazin, the Programming and Systems Manager. We exchanged greetings. The next day Art opened the conference room door just a crack, stuck his head in the room and said "Hey, kid! Drazin wants to see you. You want to learn something, or what?" He didn't even wait for an answer. "C'mere kid!" I was passed from Systems Manager to Contracts Manager, then to the Customer Services Manager, and so on. The months went by, and training ended. I went into the field, did my job, and made both the 100 Percent and President's Club. At IBM this is an honor which entitles you to go to the President's Club meeting, which in this instance was held in Florida. At the President's Club banquet, I was sitting at my table, waiting for the dinner to begin, totally engrossed in a new product announcement. I felt a hand on my shoulder, and heard a gentle voice say, "Hey, kid! I want someone to meet you." As usual, he didn't even wait for an answer. "C'mere kid!"

He took me up to the dais and introduced me to a gentleman by the name of T. Vincent Learson, who would eventually become the Chairman of the Board at IBM, and would have a great effect on my life. Then he took me to meet Thomas Watson, Jr., who was then IBM's Chairman. As Mr. Watson shook

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my hand, he said in a low voice, "Mark, Art broke me into the profession. He told me that you were as "Good" a programmer and trainee as I was. Is this true?" I replied with a smile and a wink, by saying that Art's statement was totally untrue. "Art's just an old, unconscionable troublemaker, whose only interest was in destroying my career path at IBM." Watson had a good belly laugh over that one. I don't know whether or not Art really broke Mr. Watson into the profession as he said, but you could see that he loved Palaci, and my feelings toward Art were as hard to disguise as his. He proceeded to give Art a great big hug. He hadn't seen Palaci in quite a while, and with a look of deep respect, he just said, "Thank you.....thank you." Art just stood there, with tears starting to well in his eyes. I guess I was too young, or dumb, or both to fully interpret Watson's thanks. Later on in life, when I became more experienced and knew how expensive a process it was to develop good people, I was able to understand the meaning of things: Art's contribution, of Watson's words to him that night, and most of all the meaning behind the big hug. I excused myself, and as I went back to my seat, I could hear Art saying to Mr. Watson, "Any time, kid....., any time."

We owe these new "Kids on the block" at least that much! They need a Career Corps branch of government. Surely they don't deserve to have people ignore their questions, or to make stupid comments such as "You should learn it the hard way, like I did." Learning it the hard way and satisfying the ego of someone who himself was denied help by a mentor, costs most companies a small fortune today. IBM paid less than average for my training owing to the type of "Courtesy" which I received from Art. He taught us all value, and in his fashion, courtesy. I've never forgotten that message; perhaps none of you should forget this one: Use some of the public training courses, and incorporate some of the books and tapes that train personnel for managing the applications found in the physical plant. Do that to try to hold the line for now, but without the mentoring that has been depicted here, you are gambling with certain disaster. In my experience, the return on mentoring investment, coupled with qualified professional technical assistance, has been fantastic. On the other hand, most of the Returns on Structured Risk for amateurish rightsizing, have been disastrous. Supplementing and complementing all of this with carefully selected retirees, could do the trick for you. It's food for thought, but not for too long.

This nation must maintain a cadre of 45,000 Art Palacis, as "Learning curve reducers." That would certainly make a difference. Two of the big messages that I got out of Lee Iacocca's autobiography were: 1) He turned Chrysler around, not with his individual capability, but with a solid cadre of extremely accomplished and mature people, and; 2) He thought that enforced retirement of qualified, in-place learning curve was the ultimate foolishness! As a nation, we'll have to replace 100,000 managers/year well past 2002, in order to stay competitive in world markets; 100,000 managers per year who will not have the luxury of time to make the growth errors that their predecessors made, regardless of position.

I feel that God, in his infinite wisdom, placed Art Palaci on earth to make sure that we wouldn't forget this message. I haven't kept track of him over the past few years, so I don't know where Art is, or if he is still alive. I hope that eventually I will be forgiven for such negligence. If he has gone to his Maker, and is now in heaven, I can just imagine him up there, opening some conference room door just a crack, sticking his head in that room and saying, "Hey, kid! You the new trainee? Do you want to learn something, or what? And without even waiting for an answer, saying: Well, what are you waiting for.....C'mere, kid!" Back here on earth, we have similar obligations to other kids, and the constructive resources to get the job done of making them strong, resourceful managers. Operating management owes these "kids" and the Palacis of the past a demonstration of honor and respect. Additional discussion here would be redundant. God bless you, Art!