GETTING THE COWS ON THEIR FEET

by Major Norman Patnode

A WHILE BACK, I WAS WORKING ON A TEAM TO reengineer the Air Force's logistics process for all the reparable items in the inventory, everything from engines to oxygen regulators to electronic circuit cards. After doing some analysis, some experimenting, and some prototyping, we were ready to implement our changes.

IN SIMPLE ENGLISH, WE WERE TRYING TO PUT A PROCESS IN place where, like Wal-Mart, every customer purchase provides the tug that causes a replacement to be shipped overnight from the warehouse to fill the hole on the shelf before the store opens the next morning. Then, in response to the hole that's just been created in the warehouse, the depot either buys or repairs a unit and quickly ships it to the warehouse. By implementing this "Wal-Mart solution" we were sure we could make the whole system respond quickly to the needs of the warfighters using the items. Although most people understand this process today, at the time it was revolutionary.

My team and I started by explaining all the flaws in the current procedures and processes, and what we needed everyone to do differently to address these problems. We laid it all out in neat, logical presentations and traveled the globe to make sure everyone got the message. But still, the masses soldiered on, continuing to behave in the same old ways.

At that time, the entire system was based on forecasted demands. Once a year, the item managers, who were responsible for ensuring that depot repairs satisfied demands, met with the war-fighters' staff at a workload conference to predict what would be needed the following year. Armed with last year's data and an enormous set of computerized forecasting algorithms, they agreed on what would be repaired during the upcoming year. The item managers then met with the depot repair shop chiefs, who were required to keep all their people and machines gainfully employed, and negotiated a workload plan. Things had been done this way for the last forty years.

Everyone recognized there were problems with the process. Actual demand always turned out significantly different than what was forecasted, leaving the war-fighters with things they didn't need and holes they couldn't fill. Assuming that a more accurate forecast was the only way to improve the situation, every year smart people got busy building a better forecast. Yet, after spending millions of dollars year after year to incorporate more data and increase the complexity of the computer algorithms, the problems persisted.

This was the state of affairs when we arrived with our proposed changes. After months of explaining, and wrestling with the item managers to change their process, I was feeling extremely frustrated because it seemed that despite our best efforts, we weren't getting anywhere at all. If anything, we were going backwards.

That's when I went to visit Chief Steve Haskin. Steve was sharp, full of energy, and above all, practical. He had 26 years of Air Force experience, grew up in Texas in the heart of cattle country, and I could always count on him to provide me with sage advice.

As I explained my concerns and frustrations, Steve interrupted me and said, "Sir, the first thing you have to do is get the cows on their feet."

I'll never forget that comment. It floored me. I just stared at him with what must have been an amusing expression because Steve laughed out loud before explaining: "When you're herding cattle, the first thing you have to do is get them up off the ground and moving. Then you can worry about heading them around in the direction you want to go.

"I think we need to do the same thing," he continued. "We need to get these people off their feet and moving. They've been lying here doing the same thing for the last forty years."

It was a clarifying moment. We had been trying to explain logically what changes needed to be made and why. Now, with Steve's help, I realized we had to find a way for them to see it themselves—we had to get them on their feet. What was needed was some sort of prod; whether it herded them into the right pasture was irrelevant, but we needed a prod that would get them up on their feet.

As luck would have it, just that morning we had demonstrated a new computer system that would let all the item managers and the repair shops see exactly what "holes" existed at each war-fighter base location. I grabbed a few key members of my team, and after making an animated, emotional appeal, got the general's permission to provide this information to all the repair shops, and tell them they could only repair something if it appeared on this list.

It worked! Predictably, the item managers went ballistic. For them, success had meant delivering what they had promised the war-fighters at the workload conference, but now the repair shops wouldn't be paying attention to the negotiated quantities. All that mattered was the list of the war-fighters' "holes." The shop chiefs weren't happy, either. In their world efficiency was king. Success depended on efficiently using all the shops' budgeted hours, but how could you efficiently plan the work when you were given a new "to do" list each day?

There were many questions, and we addressed them all as we met with both the item managers and the shop chiefs. Eventually we worked out a compromise where the shops repaired only what was indicated on the "holes" list each day, but the requirements were prioritized each day

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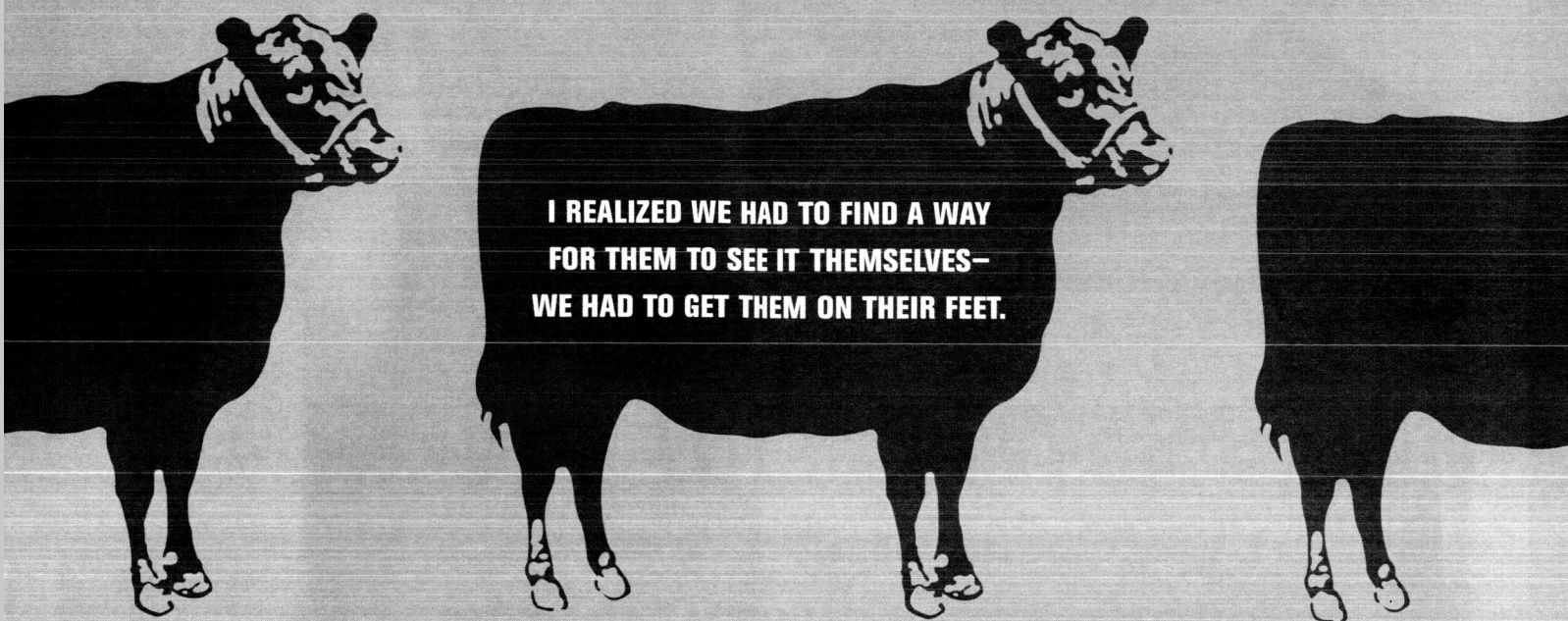
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by usage-predicting software algorithms. It wasn't the perfect solution, but it was an excellent short-term win. Everyone from the war-fighter staff to the shop workers quickly saw the benefit of letting actual customer demand drive the repair process.

In a few short months, we stopped repairing equipment no one wanted, and focused on what was actually needed. In the next year we eliminated $798M of inventory and reduced delivery time to the war-fighters by more than a third. But more importantly, this first step got everyone on their feet and moving. Without that, we would never have been successful in rounding everyone up, coordinating their efforts, and moving the Air Force's logistics system in this new direction. •

LESSONS
• There comes a point where you have to stop talking about what you're going to do and just give it a try. Results will change beliefs much faster than words or briefing charts.
• Most people won't willingly jump into something they don't understand, don't see a need for, or aren't confident they can excel in—you have to give them a push.

QUESTION
Is it time to stop talking and take action on your idea?

SOLD ON STORY

A professor of program management and leadership at the Defense Acquisition University (DAU), **MAJOR NORMAN PATNODE** believes that stories accelerate learning in areas such as leadership, risk management, and teamwork. Recently, Patnode put his theory to the test when he introduced the concept of learning through story to fellow DAU staff. With support from the Academy of Program and Project Leadership (APPL), Patnode organized a Knowledge Sharing Workshop in December 2003 modeled on similar programs run by APPL at NASA centers.

The workshop was a big success. Patnode reports: "We had nearly thirty folks participate, and their comments were all positive. Many shared with the group how they planned to start using stories both in their classrooms and in their group facilitation work."

Patnode's respect for story has another APPL model, as well—the semi-annual Forum of Master Project Managers. "I gained a tremendous amount when I was invited to the Masters Forum," explains Patnode. "While I was there, I learned much from the wonderful stories that were shared so openly. Since then, as I've reflected on those stories and how I can apply them to what I do, I continue to find new insights. It seems that each time I reach up and pull one of those stories back out of my memory, a bunch of other related stories come tumbling down as well, so I end up reflecting not only on the original story, but a web of interrelated stories. That's the beauty of it—learning from stories is multi-layered and never ends."