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The Shingo Prize for Operational Excellence
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Editor's note: "When Theory Meets Practice - Stories From the Workplace" features professionals who share stories of challenging events that tested them with the unexpected.

By Robert Miller, executive director of The Shingo Prize for Operational Excellence

When I graduated from Brigham Young University with an undergraduate degree in manufacturing engineering and was working on my master’s degree in computer integrated manufacturing, I had big plans. They didn’t include driving around a forklift outside in the dead of an Iowa winter.

Little did I know that a metal bar sticking out of the Mississippi River would lead to startling discoveries for John Deere, the company I was working for, and life-changing insights for me.

I had long hoped to work for John Deere and was fortunate to qualify for what I thought would be a fantastic job with the company right out of college. Life threw me a curve ball the first time I stepped up to the plate, however, because very shortly after I started, the company was hit with a crippling strike that stopped all production for seven months.
Instead of designing fabulous new machines, as I thought I would be doing, I found myself sent to a back room where I was given a job to organize cards for die sets. Each card had the name and description of a particular tool and the parts it was used for. Over the years, those cards had become terribly disorganized. It was not the kind of job I had envisioned I would be doing as I worked on my master's degree.

After two agonizing months of card-sorting I got the courage to lobby management for a new assignment. I was directed outside to organize old tooling that was dumped behind the plant to be saved for possible replacement parts. Much of my time was spent driving a forklift that did not come equipped with a seat cushion to soften the bumps or to insulate me from the machine’s cold metal seat. Again, I found myself wondering if I had wasted time with my hard-earned academic degrees.

One day, quite by accident, I noticed a small metal pipe sticking out of the mud on the banks of the nearby Mississippi River. Curious, I hooked up some chains and drug it out of the water. To my surprise, the pipe was attached to a very expensive piece of equipment that had originally cost the company more than $100,000.

Employees were paid based on the amount of work they could complete, and this machine was designed to make a complex part. Those assigned to use this very efficient equipment made less money than those working on other machines in the plant. So, one night it was tossed into the river and reported missing!

I eventually discovered numerous other pieces of equipment and tooling that had met similar fates, becoming expensive but ineffective obstacles to the progress of the great Mississippi River. The company set production standards, and people were expected to meet them. If those standards were unrealistic and no one would listen, apparently the employees had found a way to make the work go away. It was unbelievable.

How could these good people I knew, who worked in this factory, behave in such a way? These were my kids’ friends’ parents and our neighbors who were struggling to work within the constraints of a management system that drove them to do things they would never do in any other part of their lives. Tools in the river were only one symptom of a system so broken that managers and workers had literally come to a complete standoff. Such flawed working relationships were not uncommon in the 1970s when management often believed that employees' natural inclination was to lie, cheat, and steal if given the chance. This mindset became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Bouncing around on my forklift got me to thinking about the responsibility management has to build collaborative, respectful relationships with its employees. Why couldn’t we treat people at work like we do at our children’s soccer party? When the strike was finally over I was named a department supervisor and immediately decided that the culture in my area would be much different and that perhaps someone would see that it could be different.

I discovered that some of the people I supervised, who worked in the company offices, had been there for more than 20 years and never visited the plant floor to see how their work impacted the manufacturing process. I took them to the floor where, to their shock, they discovered all sorts of important ways they could make improvements in their processes that made the workers' jobs safer and easier. I had the same experience when I began working on automation projects. I involved people who worked on the floor in the design of the equipment and machinery they were going to be using.

Now, most of my work at the Shingo Prize for Operational Excellence is focused on helping companies build powerful cultures based on the principles of respect, humility, and continuous improvement with an eye toward perfection. This kind of corporate, collaborative work environment has been a life passion for me, and I have to wonder what direction my career would have taken if it had not been sparked by insights gained along the Mississippi River, in the cold, behind a factory, doing what I thought at the time was meaningless, manual labor.