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Saving Face American Style: Engineering Integrity Can Be Detrimental In Post-Global Business Culture

by Paul L. Schimel, PE

I received an interesting note from a dear friend that I simply have to share. "They can't handle the truth" he barked out in his note. He described an interesting story that revealed an embarrassing cross section in our state of business affairs.

He described an interview he'd had during a job search. It started out as an urgent call. "Is this At Will?... Senior super staff sales engineer here from [blank] power semiconductor. We must meet at the following hotel downtown in an hour". So my friend, At Will, complied. "What are we if not for flexibility?" he thought as he made his way downtown.

When he got there, he was a bit early as a matter of discipline. There was an introduction made to "John". Basic business interaction. John was fidgety, constantly checking his watch, his smart phone, etc. Will was even keel.

As the meeting pressed on, John asked At Will "so what do you do when a prime customer has a failure?" And At Will responded proudly "I would go to the customer's site and offer a peer review of their layout, stackup, schematic, calculations, then I would take some measurements on the circuit when it was running. In an inverter for example, I'd make an in situ double pulse tester and measure E_{off} , E_{on} , and E_{rr} . I'd then back out the lumped stray inductance from the waveforms and try to understand the impact of that stored energy on matters of ringing and diode reverse recovery."

Will continued, "I'd also look at the gate-drive waveforms carefully and watch for Cdv/dt turn-on artifacts. I'd inquire as to what temperature the device failed at, ask what the deadtime is. In short, I'd try to gather up as much information as possible for the failure analysis work. Then I'd submit all of that information to the FA lab together with the failed device to give them a complete picture of the failure framework".

At that point the interview was over. At Will noticed that John had a horrified look on his face as though he'd just seen a ghost. And judging by John's later decision, he had. Small talk commenced. John concluded by telling of a customer visit in a nearby town that At Will knew well. Will mentioned the key players' first names and the project description. Again, a horrified look, as though knowing a key account is somehow a threat.

To wrap this up, this is the new "post glob" or post-globalization culture. If John hired At Will, he would bring in a vast set of skills, contacts and disciplines that ranged from sales/marketing to pre- and post-sales support to system, machine and device design engineering to root-cause analysis.

But John's company is a global one. John's position involves a lot of saving face and carefully walking on egg shells coordinating folks that claim they know stuff to address customer needs. It seldom works. He can hardly ever deliver. That's why he was hiring. As it would turn out, saying the words and doing the work are two different items. "Says easy, does hard" as the saying goes.

John's world is a delicate one that lives and dies in 90-day intervals. Sales in the book is the only metric by which John eats or starves. At Will would bring transparency to that operation where entire tiers of employees are wholeheartedly dedicated to covering and/or saving face. This transparency cannot be allowed. To quote Seinfeld, "No soup for [At Will]!"

The post interview communication ended with John deferring to people that didn't exist, a nonresponsive contact path, and a ghosting. In the matter of hiring At Will, John had no choice but to save face and avoid what by normally rational standards would be a great investment. But John's stance is a common one. It is engrained in the culture, codified and quizzed in mandatory training. Anything that doesn't maintain the façade is the enemy.

My dear friend found this situation odd. His grandmother was a "Rosie the Riveter," his family is dedicated to hard work and honesty. The notion of doing stuff right, the notion of delivering a proper service as opposed to a modern nonresponse and buzzword vape speak. What John wanted was someone that answers the phone and says "due to unusually high call volumes, our hold times are infinite.....oopsie, my computer is running slow today.....sorry, I have to reboot now..." or "that's not my area" followed by the sound of a cradle command at the central office, the bane of that single "click".

In this interview, John needed a response worthy of “Mikey the mouse” and not the likes of Rosie the Riveter. Yet if John were to venture a glance out past his nose, past his untiring concern for his immediate aggrandizement, he would see that the customers immensely valued what At Will brought to the table, regardless of which continent the bookings were on. That value would increase the sales numbers that had John hungry and opening revolving requirements for FAEs.

About The Author



Paul Schimel is a lifelong innovator with an untiring commitment to engineering excellence in both the practical and theoretical aspects of power electronics and related mixed-signal, mixed-mode and mixed-domain design and control work. He is a licensed PE bringing over two decades of formal experience to his customer base and internal resources. He is familiar with most DOD, MIL, UL, NFPA70, DOD and IEC standards and how they are tested and passed.

Schimel attended the School of Electrical Engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, where he earned a BSEE degree while specializing in power electronics. After this, he spent eight years in successful design engineering roles in consumer equipment including power supply design for projection and direct view televisions and telecommunications equipment including ring generators, battery rectifiers/eliminators, dc-dc converters, and UPSs—both switch-mode and ferroresonant.

Schimel then moved on to applications engineering where he has spent the last 15 years on power management support and design work. He has assisted successful designs from milliwatts to megavolt-amps and from IC/device design to prototype stages to finished end equipment. Applications ranging from industrial to automotive to full radiation hardened designs. “When I find a design or problem to be impossible, I go see Paul, he figures it out” expounds one of his 20-year peers in the industry.

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