The War On FAEs (Part 4): Personal Reinvention

by C.V. Ferro

The earlier parts of this article series discussed the evolution of the role of the semiconductor FAE from the good times of the early years when FAEs had some autonomy and influence within their companies, to the more recent times when their influence has waned, or worse yet, their roles have been devalued and their work undermined. In this latest edition to the series, the author shares recent experiences as an FAE that forced him to reconsider his career choice. –The Editor.

A few months back I woke up at 1:32 AM on a Tuesday morning. Prior to this I had a dream that I was really dizzy and my heart was racing. In the dream, I felt like I was dying. It wasn't a dream. I walked downstairs, had a drink of water. Still dizzy, heart still racing, feeling *really* bad. My wife was awake wondering what was happening. I told her of the events and she took me to the ER, just to be on the safe side. After a quick triage, they found that there was nothing major in error. For the first time in my life, I heard the words "anxiety attack" as my diagnosis.

Prior to this, I had been giving everything I had at work in the last few months. I was an FAE, an internal apps engineer, a design engineer, IP generator, customer advocate, failure analysis engineer, test engineer, circuit designer, and validation engineer. All while my management grew more and more angry that I used technical terms and led with technical excellence. I was in the midst of full-on active aggression—as outlined in part 3[3]—compounded by a heinous workload.

Then the pressure came. "We need to double down" was the discussion a few days prior to my ER visit. The discussion was served up with "the only reason I keep 'youz' around is so I ain't gotta do nuthin". Jeepers, can I get a "go team"?

Of course, by "we" he meant me. But I didn't have the energy or the resources to double down while the other folks stared at their CRM dashboard all day, issued prompt nonresponses and quoted policy to each other in CWD context. "We have a strict policy and thereby we can't (C), won't (W) and don't (D)".

Time To Escape!

As I was sitting in the ER, meeting with various folks, I arrived at the root cause of the anxiety attack. It was work. I spent many years making my team look good, yet all it added up to was more work for me and less for them. From my lexicon, that's not a good deal on any metric. I decided then and there that it was over. I summarily refused to have a cadre of CWD-ers have this impact on my well-being.

Where To Escape To?

I spent the next few weeks interviewing. Construction companies, motor companies, government agencies, utilities, off-road machinery companies, naval architect firms, IP firms, educational institutions, satellite companies and yes, a few semiconductor companies.

The overwhelming majority of my interviews went very well. The same stuff that I did for several decades has immediate, equitable, lucrative utility in other business and government sectors. The vast skills and tools that I maintained and grew are needed from paper to pallet, bench to boardroom. They are highly valued, as are my credentials. All while the local policies and brainwashing of my semiconductor employer had me believing that there was no existence after the FAE caste.

Meanwhile, I waxed nonresponsive at "work," like everyone else. Afterburners off, bare minimum. If it's late, so what! But this was problematic. When the only one doing the work goes quiet, the silence is heard clear up the management chain.

When I gave notice that I was leaving, I was testing a large prime mover system for a friend. I was sitting on top of a 6000-lb dc shunt motor with a hi-potter in my lap and a megger on my knee, clipped onto conductors the size of my wrist. It seemed fitting.

Management's first words were on policy and CWD at which point I tuned out. "Oh yeah, policy? Wow….sorry, I gotta go, I'm workin on stuff."

The remainder of the time at work didn't really matter. From that moment on, my "superiors" behaved like angry babies—an embarrassment to any species, organization or protocol. This was far worse than their usual overcommitment hubris "yes, yes, yes, yes, we'll have it on your desk tomorrow and you can count on me" to make book at a client meeting and subsequent nonresponse.

For my escape, I chose a position at a long-time client that does exciting stuff with a brilliant global team. I negotiated carefully, and made sure there was plenty of room for advancement, growth, responsibility and interaction. There would be friends, interns, peers, and lots of work. In my other interviews, I made some wonderful friends too at organizations anywhere from pre-startups to 100-year-old companies. I received some wonderful offers.

In retrospect, I know of other FAEs that reinvented themselves in arenas ranging from fire marshals to patent agents. There's a former FAE in the southwest that left to become an EMT, which led to him becoming a fire marshal and an instructor. There's another former FAE that became a volunteer sheriff and a senior communications engineer.

One FAE I knew left the guild and moved to Hawaii as a patent agent. When the folks at the big firms miss a deadline, he still has a few hours left in his day and signatory authority. Many others became full time instructors or professors. It seems that the only limits to what an FAE can do next are in the FAE's imagination. So, shake off the morons and pursue your passion!

How Do You Know When To Leave?

It's an instinctive matter. Look for the signs. You'll see the blank stares, envious managers and malicious peers long before the active aggression starts. Pick up on the signals and bail.

Closing Advice

Don't do what I did. I knew full well I was propping up bumping morons. I was told this by others and I knew it. I got many questions from peers like "why are *you* there??" The writing was on the wall, but I was working too hard to read it. Chasing too many carrots on too many strings.

Don't do that! Change the game. Regardless of corporate brainwashing or CWD criteria, the employee and the employer both have two words. The employee has "I quit" and the employer has "you're fired". No politic or hubris can obscure either statement.

I managed to escape unscathed, aside from being treated like dirt by angry babies. All of the empty promises from prior management were guaranteed in my new role. Now I have people lined up outside my office with deep questions on power, systems, EMC, IP, polyphase machines, transformers and wonderful stuff. I make daily contributions to awesome projects sans the active aggression and ignorance.

My new colleagues appreciate me and I them. Now I get to sit on the other side of the table when the monkey motion of the semiconductor supplier comes into the room blinded by their own CRM dashboard. "No, I'm sorry sparky, I don't want to hear your presentation on low-power op amps when I'm asking you for details on a SiC Schottky". "The project name…….how about 'sneezy'? Nah, scratch that. How about 'bah bah booey'? Yes, yes, yes of course, I know it's for the computer."

References

1. "The War On FAEs (Part 1): Remembering When FAEs Ruled"
2. "The War On FAEs (Part 2): New Management Brings Benign Neglect"
3. "The War On FAEs (Part 3): Management Shifts To Active Aggression"

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