



Lyle's Law of Mutuality

this summer, somewhat to my surprise, Dorothy and I celebrated our golden wedding anniversary. It was a surprise not because we had been married that long, but simply because it had *been* that long. Fifty years—and a wonderful 50 years it has been—is a long time. Half of a century. One-twentieth of a millennium. Does this give me a license to expound on what makes a successful marriage? I don't think so. I'll leave that to the psychologists and sociologists. It does, however, give me an opportunity to talk about one characteristic of a marriage that seems to apply to any kind of partnership. The result will be Lyle's Law of Mutuality, which shall be revealed shortly.

I was first introduced to this notion back when I was in the Navy and, having completed boot camp and nine months of technical school, reported aboard the *USS Norton Sound*. Like most other members of the crew, I was assigned to a position in what is known as the "Sea and Anchor Detail," which defines everyone's job when the ship is entering or leaving port or an anchorage. Since I had yet to achieve the status of petty officer, my position was as a member of a line handling party on the ship's fantail. "Party," as used here, is a curious naval term that means group or team but did not in any way describe our activity. Line handling was no party. It was hard work and, occasionally, quite dangerous. At such times, the boatswain's mate would say, "Okay, boys. One hand for the ship. One hand for yourself".

What did he mean? Well, it took me a while to grasp the full significance of this advice, but I finally deduced that he was telling us to take care of ourselves while also working for the team. A sailor who dedicates himself totally to the ship without any regard for his own safety won't last long in that environment. Some accident will befall him—a parted line, a leg caught in a coil, any number of things. And then, not only is the sailor in pain or worse, the ship has lost a sailor: The sailor is hurt. The ship is hurt.

This principle applies to any collection of people, be it two or ten thousand. Lyle's Law of Mutuality summarizes it this way:

A group can only succeed if its individual members succeed. And vice versa.

Let me comment briefly on a group of two—a marriage. One might conceive of a marriage in which one of the parties totally suppresses his or her identity and dedicates all of ones energy to the partnership, but I wouldn't expect it to be a very successful or a very interesting marriage. I think

the best marriage is a partnership of two individuals—each competent and self reliant in his or her own right, but dedicated as well to their joint mutual success.

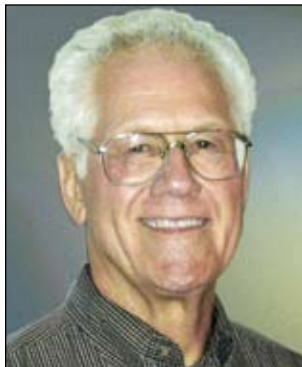
But I said I wasn't going to expound on what makes a successful marriage. Let me turn instead to our work. If you are the boss, what kind of employees do you want? There may have been a time when the boss might have asked for employees who put the interest of the company always and far ahead of their own. Can that work? I was tempted to say that it might if the work is simple manual labor, employing workers who are interchangeable and replaceable. But even here, the workers have to take care of themselves with food and water and occasional rest or they—and their employer—will have a problem. Productivity will decline until the worker has to be replaced—a not inexpensive process in itself.

If the Law of Mutuality holds for manual laborers, how much more so does it apply to professional workers such as engineers.

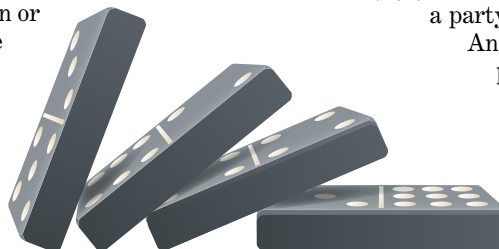
One hand for the ship, certainly. For the professional, this means more than "a full day's work for a fair day's pay." It means accepting and working toward achieving the goals of the organization. It means exercising the duty of care, protecting the intellectual property, trade secrets, and know-how of the company. It means having a loyalty that admits honest and constructive criticism, but not mean-spirited bad-mouthing.

And one hand for yourself. Outside work, live a life. Enjoy your friends and family. Have a hobby. Go to a party, and forget about work for a while.

And continue your education. Many companies used to—and I suppose some still do—support only those educational programs that were directly related to an employee's current job. A sort of unenlightened self-interest position. The attitude



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toward education is different today, with the more progressive companies realizing that virtually any education is better than no education at all and, if the employee will learn, the company will provide support.

You also need to have one hand for yourself while you are at work. A few sentences ago I said that you need to work toward achieving the goals of the company. Well, you also need goals of your own, and you need to work toward reaching them. Of course, while your goals will not be the same as those of your employer, neither should they be contrary to them. If they are, you should probably be updating your résumé.

At the same time, managers have to respect and, indeed, encourage their employees to work in their own interests as well as in the interest of their employer. Not always easy, but, in my opinion, essential. In my own experience, I watched—and I hope helped—associate deans mature and become more capable until they went off to greater responsibilities and rewards. I missed them when they left, but I'm sure they had contributed more to the school than if they had not been growing as they worked.

In the end, as is usually the case, it is a matter of balance. A group,

be it a company, a department, or a line handling party, is a collection of individuals working together in a situation where the goals of the individuals must be balanced with those of the group. If the balance is upset in either direction—if the sailor pulls on the line with both hands but fails to hold on to the mast, or if he clings to the mast with both hands and doesn't help with the line—the success of the group will be severely diminished, if not lost altogether. Mutuality—simultaneously working toward their own goals and toward the shared goals of the group—will help assure the attainment of them all.

—Lyle D. Feisel, Ph.D., P.E.
Iowa Alpha '61

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