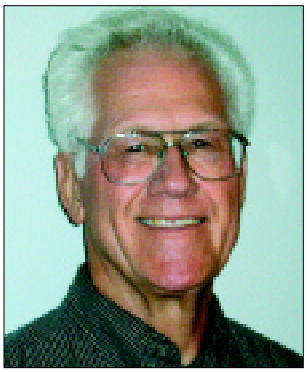
Lyle's Law of Uniqueness

IT WAS A MOST MEMORABLE DAY. After 10 days at sea, our freighter had completed the passage from San Francisco to Japan and was going slowly into the port of Yokohama. It was my family's first time in Japan; indeed it would be our first time on land in the eastern hemisphere. On television we could see a very grainy picture of Neil Armstrong taking the first steps on the moon. The date was July 21, 1969, and it was the day of a giant step for mankind and also a pretty big jump for the Feisels.

In our first exploration of Yokohama that afternoon, we toured the Silk Center, walked the streets looking at the small shops, and also visited a large department store. It was a Monday, so all the young people were at work, leaving the department store populated by Japanese retirees and five Americans. Looking out over the crowd we saw a sea of uniformly black hair on people who were all of roughly the same height and, if you didn't look very closely, very much alike in appearance. I felt that we were seeing Joe and Jane Japanese multiplied by several hundred and all very much alike and very ordinary, at least in Japan.



There are no ordinary people.

As the years have passed, however, I have thought of that day in the department store many times and have come to realize that the hundreds of people we saw there were not really that ordinary or that much alike. They all had different parents, different spouses (or none at all), different children (or none at all), and different experiences (where "none at all" is not an option). Indeed, extending this thinking to ever-broader groups of people inspired Lyle's Law of Uniqueness, *There are no ordinary people.*

Biologically, it is quite clear that everyone is unique, right from birth. We are told that the human genome is a string of some 70 billion pairs of protein molecules arranged in different sequences. Of course, as I understand it, many parts of the sequence are more or less fixed, but there is still a lot of room for a seemingly infinite number of combinations and permutations that determine individual characteristics. If *ordinary* implies pretty much the same as everyone else, biologically, we are not.

It is what happens *after* birth, however, that really makes each individual unique. We are all shaped by our experiences, by the people we have known, the things we have learned, and the places we have been. We have had different joys and different hurts; different successes and different failures; different ups and different downs. How, then, can anyone be ordinary?

As you advance in your education and in your profession, it is easy to forget this law. After all, if you are gaining all this knowledge, importance, and responsibility, surely you are being set further and further apart from the *ordinary* people around you. Well, maybe you are becoming more different, but you are not becoming less ordinary. You can't be less purple if no one is purple.

When I completed my bachelor's degree, I went to work for the aeronautical division of a large company. I was a bit surprised when I was shown to my workplace and found that it was not a cubicle or even a desk in a room with other engineers. It was a workbench, complete with test equipment and power outlets—and no telephone. Then I met the guy at the next bench, and, lo and behold, he wasn't even an engineer! He didn't even have a degree! He was an ordinary technician. Well, that may have been the beginning of the Law of Uniqueness because, engineer or not, that guy taught me a lot. He was not ordinary in any sense of the word, and, as far as experience was concerned, he made me feel pretty ordinary.

Of course, he still had a lot to learn too. Such as the old carpenter's law, "Measure twice, cut once." One day he was connecting 28-volt power to a flight-control system when he failed to check the polarity and hooked it up backward—positive where it should have been negative and vice versa. You can usually get by with that if you are using vacuum tubes, but transistors are very unforgiving. He had his 15 minutes of fame, but I wouldn't say that he enjoyed them.

For the past decade or so, engineering educators in the United States and many other countries have been placing a lot of emphasis on working in interdisciplinary teams. The reason usually given for this emphasis is that today's engineering problems are so large and complex that a team approach is required. I'm not

sure they are that much more complex than the Manhattan Project or the Apollo Program or the 747, but I still think it is a good idea to stress teaming. If a team is to be successful, it can't be made up of ordinary people, i. e., all alike. The people need to be unique, each bringing his or her individual talents and perspective to the common effort. Fortunately, *there are no ordinary people*. Everyone can contribute something to the success of a team. It is the team's challenge to determine what that might be for each member.

In our private lives—the things we do outside of work—we also need to remember this law as we deal with the myriad people with whom we interact. The convenience store clerk is not an ordinary person. The paper carrier is not an ordinary person. The woman who keeps everything she owns in a shopping cart is not an ordinary person. I don't mean that we have to take responsibility for them. They do, however, deserve to be respected and, most important, not ignored.

There are two ways in which ignoring this law can be harmful.

There are two ways in which failing to remember this law can be harmful. The first—and probably most common—is to consider yourself to be special and almost everyone else to be ordinary. Probably even more destructive, however, is the converse of that failing—to consider yourself to be ordinary. Remember, *there are no ordinary people.* Look for your own uniqueness. What is different about you? Are these differences good? If so, develop them. If not, eliminate or suppress them. Above all, have confidence in your extraordinariness.

Of course, uniqueness is not always good. The worst characters in history were unique—fortunately. But all in all, it is this astonishing breadth of humanity that makes our lives interesting and, indeed, productive and successful.

—**Lyle D. Feisel,** Ph.D., P.E.,
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