

Iron, Coke, Chromium Steel

By Jeffrey M. Saltzman, M.A.

I really like people who can make things with their hands; always have. People who produce goods like cars, homes, planes, clothing, food and their underlying components, like steel, lumber, bricks, cotton and energy, hold a special place in my heart. Farmers as well, are truly special in my mind because they wrest a living from the very earth itself, allowing the vast majority of us to lead a more comfortable existence. I have more than once given serious thought to buying an old farmstead and attempting to rehabilitate it. Here in the Hudson Valley of New York, there are old apple orchards, vineyards and smallish farms that people buy to raise exotic animals, such as alpaca and llamas for their wool, as well as various goats and other livestock whose milk is used to make unique cheeses (I am not sure any of them actually makes a profit). My family and I like to go to craft shows where craftspeople are plying their trade. I can watch for hours as a bowl takes shape from the blows of a skilled hand holding an adze, or as a blacksmith hammers iron into splendid forms. These craftspeople, as well as the others who produce products, directly add value to our society by making things that others can use in their daily lives.

In my attempt to feel somewhat connected to these people, I built a greenhouse in my backyard and a small shop where I try out various crafts. I tried a garden, but the deer and raccoons were cleverer than I on when to harvest, usually getting their crops in the day or so before my own harvest. My most ambitious project to date was to assemble a reproduction of an 18th century Adirondack guide boat, which cost me a small part of a finger (so much for skill), lost to a jointer as I straightened an edge on a plank. I take nothing away from doctors, dentists, teachers, biologists, chemists and a host of others for they, too, are critical to our existence and they add great value, but for those who can create high quality objects with their hands, that is something to behold.

When I decided to go to graduate school for industrial/organizational psychology, my first choice was a school in Ohio, the industrial heartland. I decided that if I was going to study industrial psychology, what better grounding than to be in a location where there was a lot of heavy industry. The fact that the institution was going to pay me to go to school simply added to the attractiveness. Continuing with my logic stream, the first job I took after school was with a steel and roller bearing producer. I was to be a generalist working across a broad swath of my field with my new graduate degree in hand. I took part in developing employee selection systems for new bearing plants in the south and the first green field steel mill built in Ohio in decades; I also did other tasks such as an employee survey and succession planning.

They never taught us what was real, iron and coke and chromium steel.

The words from Billy Joel's tune Allentown memorialize the decay of the industrial heartland. While I am positive about the resulting cleaner environment as these industries have been diminished, it breaks my heart to see the pain that it has caused those who worked in these noble professions. I have pain for those who have lost their jobs, have lost a part of who they are and I wonder where they are now. I wish them well. I would expect that given the more advanced technologies available today, we could build cleaner versions of these industries, but I am not so sure we could rebuild the industrial base that once was. Allentown is just one location where this pain was felt, for there are literally thousands of Allentowns across the U.S.

I was born in New York City, but spent a good part of my childhood growing up in upstate New York. In a town near my hometown, you could stand at one end of main street, and for a good distance, see one shuttered factory after another. In another small town nearby, which used to be the shoe capital of the country, there are

now massive abandoned rotting factories littering the landscape. Rail lines next to the factories that once hummed with activity, bringing in raw materials and shipping out finished product, now lie quietly rusting.

I used to hear stories of immigrants who upon landing at Ellis Island were limited to three English words, “Which way EJ?” It has been a long time since these areas have felt real prosperity, the kind that draws immigrants and others like a beacon of hope—a sense of prosperity that is generated by fulfilling the dreams and the hopes people have for their lives. It is the sense of prosperity people have by providing for their families, a sense of prosperity felt when people have confidence in what the future holds for them. The people who have these dreams are no different from others around the world in terms of what they want out of life. And while these dreams do have variations, there is little difference when you look at the core essence of those dreams by generation, gender, ethnicity or geography. Dreams are dreams and people are people.

Every child had a pretty good shot. To get at least as far as their old man got. But something happened on the way to that place.

My second professional job was to become a specialist with a research company that studied employee attitudes and organizational culture with the goal of helping organizations enhance performance and effectiveness, while improving conditions for the workers themselves. I studied culture and employee attitudes globally for the next 18 years, examining results from hundreds and hundreds of companies across millions of people. I filled up multiple passports with visa stamps in the process and I ended up running and owning that company for a good portion of those years. In company after company, the consistency of the findings was truly remarkable. Of course there was variation on the absolute scores. Some companies were better run, or had better widgets to sell into stronger markets, but when you examined the items that employees around the world used to define effective management, or the items that translated into more positive employees that gave extra effort, the results were truly remarkably similar. It did not matter what kind of employee you were measuring, from which generation or location. The data stated again that people are people wanting similar things out of the work environment and in essence out of life. We are all driven by human desires.

Well, our fathers fought the Second World War. Spent their weekends on the Jersey shore. Met our mothers in the USO. Asked them to dance. Danced with them slow.

With the above as backdrop, I began thinking that while it is all well and good to have emotionally attached, satisfied or engaged employees, or employees willing to give discretionary effort helping their organizations succeed, measuring those conditions of satisfaction or engagement was not the whole critical story for the employee or the organization. To me, a missing component was Employee Confidence. In order to achieve a high level of Employee Confidence, the employee needs to be engaged, but the engaged employee is not necessarily confident. The engaged employee can be working in a dying industry, for a poorly managed organization that will go out of existence, or the engaged employee can see his/her skill set rusting away, making them less and less employable as time marches on.

I defined two distinct components or sub-dimensions to Employee Confidence, Organizational Confidence and Personal Confidence. Each of these sub-dimensions has an internal and external factor. The internal aspect of Organizational Confidence focuses on the internal functioning of the organization (e.g. is it well managed, does it have effective business processes, can it make profits?). The external aspect of Organizational Confidence focuses on the environment in which the organization operates (e.g. is the organization’s industry robust and healthy, is it a tough competitor, does it have products that are attractive to customers?).

The internal aspect of Personal Confidence focuses on the employee’s future with his/her current employer and is the traditional driver of how employee loyalty used to be generated from the employee’s perspective (e.g. does the employee have job security, is there a promising future for him/her and is he/she being prepared for that future?). Finally, the external aspect of Personal Confidence examines how prepared the employee feels to leave his/her current organization, should he/she need to, and to find a similar job elsewhere (e.g. my skills would allow me to find a similar job, with similar pay and others are hiring people with skills like mine).

Some of the data that I have collected suggest that this quadrant of the model, External Personal Confidence, is another way to establish loyalty among employees. For if the organization can no longer supply the traditional carrots that lead to loyalty (Internal Personal Confidence), the organization should supply a new carrot (External Personal Confidence). This ensures that employees don’t feel that by continuing to work at the organization, their skills are rusting away, but instead feel that by working for the organization, they are keeping themselves marketable and attractive to other organizations. While of course it is never wholly

one way or the other, but rather shades of gray regarding the categories the organization can supply to the employee, my hypothesis is that if the organization is a good place to be from, the employee is more likely to stick around rather than jump at the first offered opportunity that arises. So far, the data suggest that employees who are highly trained and feel capable of moving around are no more likely to do so than employees who feel trapped in their jobs due to how unmarketable they view their current skill sets.

For the promises our teachers gave. If we worked hard, if we behaved. So the graduations hang on the wall. But they never really helped us at all.

In the last line, I would have to disagree with Billy Joel's steelworkers—education never hurts. From a theoretical standpoint, I think this model of Employee Confidence touches on and perhaps builds from the concepts of learned helplessness, locus of control and efficacy theories, including self, means and situational efficacy.

What do you buy when you have high levels of Employee Confidence? I believe that Employee Confidence can have an impact at the global, national, organizational and personal level, and these theories are being tested out now. If, for instance, you take a representative random sample of employees from within a country who exhibit a high degree of Employee Confidence in their respective organizations, it is likely that we are looking at a healthy business climate within that country, one that is positively perceived, with well-run organizations positioning themselves for future growth and all that it implies.

If the employees within a specific organization are exhibiting a high degree of Employee Confidence, I would hypothesize that they are engaged, willing to assume control over their own future and the organization's, willing to make things happen, display higher degrees of confidence in the organization's products and/or services to its customers, resulting in increased sales. I also think that more confident employees will likely create conditions that will drive organizations to higher levels of performance with respect to employee treatment. For if your employees are confident and they can go elsewhere, you had better get your act together if you want to keep them. The results as they roll in will be interesting.

And we're living here in Allentown. ■

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