

FOREMAN STORIES

Story 1

I must share a few stories about how I was taught “management by foreman Durai Achary. Durai was a short lean gentleman with a long grey and white beard. He was very proud of the fact that he came from a goldsmith family. I had just joined the camp as works manager, fresh from IIT, Madras. Durai was very respectful but skeptical of me.

He had a worktable at the entrance to the shop floor. He was always working, mending things, making fixtures. He had the “bastard file” as his constant companion and loved to refer to it by its proper name. He was a consummate craftsman.

He had made it a habit to follow me around when ever I walked into the shop floor. If I spoke to any operators, he would listen carefully but if I made even a small mistake he would jump in and take over. Often, he spoke for the operator, I seldom got a point across if he got into the act.

Every few days, he would come into my office wait till I asked him to sit down, refuse to do so and proceed to teach me. He would go over significant parts of my “style” in embarrassing detail and almost “role play” the “right way” of approaching the issue. One day, I asked him “why are you teaching me all this? Is it not better for you to have a dumb boss?” He became very serious drew himself up to his full height (of 5’3” or 5’4”) stroked his beard and said “Nee Seemai padippu padichikittu vandute, onnume therialaiye!” (You have acquired western education but don’t seem to know anything!) I want to be a good foreman. I can’t be a good foreman if you are not a good works manager. You don’t know how to be a works manager. You have not “ripened” enough. I am teaching you the principles of our tradition that made us great craftsman. Learn from me”.

Story 2

Foreman Durai Achary taught me another fundamental lesson on what it means to maintain role boundaries and honour role responsibilities. Durai had the habit of clearly asking for delivery specifications in terms of product quality and time whenever a job was assigned to the shop. I had noticed that every now and again, he would schedule work in such a way, that the jobs were completed in advance but, he would “deliver” only at the stipulated time.

Once we were pressurized by the marketing team to speed up a delivery. After the usual bargaining with the sales force, I went up to Durai and asked if he could deliver job x a couple of days earlier than the negotiated time. Durai with dignified deliberateness put his “bastard file” down on the table, drew himself up to his full height and said “Velai kodukka varaiya kedukka varaiya? (do you come here to give us work or spoil our wok?) I will deliver at the exact time and to your specifications. If you can’t handle the pressure of dealing with your customers, don’t pass it on to me. If your sales people have failed to collect money and want to compromise because the accountant is angry, manage them. If you come here and say, “hurry up!” and force me to disturb the correct pace of work, quality will suffer. Once you initiate a process for doing bad quality work, with what face will you come tomorrow to demand quality from me? Is this what you learnt in your engineering college?”