

There Ain't No Such Thing as a Mechanic in a Bottle

by Mike Roberts

Some of the more important business lessons I have learned came not from working with major companies or with captains of industry: Many are commonsense lessons I learned growing up in Texas.

Like many other 16-year-old boys, one of my key concerns was transportation. Stated even more simply, I needed a car. Working at the Texaco station for the princely sum of a dollar per hour (yes, I was overpaid even then) eliminated many possible forms of transportation.

Essentially, Camaros, Mustangs, and GTOs were all but out of the question, those cars being reserved for the sons and daughters of well-to-do families. With my total savings amounting to \$300 after three months of work, what I was really in the market for was a “beater with a heater.”

A First Car

As luck would have it, I found myself a 1965 Impala four-door sedan with no less than 250,000 miles on it. The car came complete with four wheels and tires, an engine that smoked like a chimney, an automatic transmission that leaked, and torn vinyl seats—front and rear. If I had to guess, I'd say that during the year and a half that I owned the car, it failed to start at least 25 percent of the time.

I was constantly trying things to make it run. I'd buy STP Gas Treatment, STP Oil Treatment, Stop-Leak for the radiator, assorted varieties of carburetor cleaner, and any other automotive product “guaranteed” to make the car start and run better. I was constantly pouring and spraying stuff into that old wreck, though with little success. Yet, time after time, I'd plunk down several of my hard-earned dollars to try the newest new secret ingredient that promised to make my car perform like new.

Now my father, Roy Roberts, was a pretty good mechanic, who had years of experience working on everything from Model T Fords, to Diesel Trucks, and even Army Tanks. Dad stopped me one day as I was beginning to pour yet another bottle of carburetor cleaner down the intake of that smoking old wreck of a car of mine. I'll never forget what he said: “Mike, I want you to take a minute and take a good look at me.”

I said, “Sure, Dad.” Though the request seemed strange, my dad was a rather imposing figure. If he asked you to do something, you were well advised to comply. After I'd given Dad the once over, I asked him if anything was wrong.

He said, “No, I just wanted you to stop and take a good look at me. As you can see, I am a mechanic, I am 6 feet tall, I weigh 235 pounds, and my knuckles are scarred from all the times a wrench has slipped while I was working on an engine. You might also notice that I have a combination of grease, oil, and sweat on my clothes from working as a

mechanic all day.” Dad then picked up the bottle of carburetor cleaner I’d been pouring into the old Chevy, and held it by the neck with two fingers.

“Now, Mike,” he said, “This is a bottle. How long is it going to take you to learn that you can’t go to the store, pay three dollars, and buy a mechanic in a bottle?”

It Doesn’t Come in a Bottle

Twenty years later, the singer and actress Cher would make the same point in an exercise commercial that said “if a good body came in a bottle, we’d all have one.” Cars that work, healthy and fit bodies, and high-performing organizations don’t come in a bottle. What’s more, they don’t come in a box of software.

These days, far too many executives are trying to find the solution to their business problems by buying “a mechanic in a bottle.” These organizations spend billions each year on software packages because managers try to solve leadership, process, and management problems by purchasing and installing various types of software packages. This approach to business management virtually never works, and it ends up wasting huge amounts of money.

In many, if not most, cases, these software packages are installed on top of existing business and process problems. The result, often, is that things become even worse than they were before. Software, by itself, cannot solve customer and product problems. And, by itself, software can never streamline business processes.

Like a skilled mechanic—who diagnoses the problems a car has, repairs it, and thus improves its performance—a skilled business leader must:

- Analyze a company’s products, services, customers, and processes;
- Identify problems and opportunities to improve competitiveness; and then
- Take action to improve the business.

Organizations that continually “try and buy good management in a box” inevitably get the same (dismal) results I had as a teenager by “trying to buy a mechanic in a bottle.”