

Hero or Villain?: The Legend of Louie

by

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We didn't know his name, only his work. He left his mark like Zorro, striking quickly in the dark of night and escaping before anyone identified him. His mark: a handwritten newsletter. The location: a heavy industrial plant in the Midwest. The crime depends upon which side you favor. Every generation has a Robin Hood, a Lone Ranger, and a Zorro. Whether he's a villain or hero seems to depend upon which side you're on.

That was the case with Louie. Of course, we've changed his name to protect his identity just in case the Statute of Limitations has not expired. We saw Louie's work long before we knew him. We came across it one day in a break area in the plant. Three workers were gathered around a table drinking coffee and reading something. You knew something had to be wrong because very few people read anything in this plant, especially newsletters from the corporation.

Anyway, it turns out the group was reading the irregular and highly irreverent latest edition of an underground, handwritten newsletter. It turns out this document was a valuable piece of property. While two or three thousand copies of the corporate newsletter—four pages printed on glossy paper with lots of pictures—gathered dust around the plant, the three hundred or so copies of Louie's newsletter were worth their weight in gold.

The newsletter would magically appear one morning, having apparently come to life on the midnight shift. It was typically three or four pages of handwritten text with an occasional piece of hand-drawn art to spice up the publication. The grammar would have gotten the author a C- in most of our urban schools today and the publication was in need of my handy, dandy computer spell-checker.

None of that mattered, however. Everyone in the plant (who was not wearing a tie) wanted a copy of the newsletter. Soiled, torn copies circulated for weeks until everyone who wanted got a chance to read the latest on happenings in the plant. What made the newsletter such a hit? It was funny, it talked about things that everybody knew and nobody talked about, and it exposed the craziness in the running of the business. He would pick on ineffective managers, poor decision making, and wasteful management practices. And, he would do it in a very humorous way.

What was management's reaction to the newsletter? I guess the top guys didn't know about it until we brought it to their attention. Mostly, it was the property and secret of the shop floor. So even the supervision didn't talk about it (even though a number of supervisors were editorial targets).

When management finally had the publication brought to their attention, complete with an example, the top-of-the-house, high-level, fully armed investigative powers of the general manager and his staff were unleashed to find the culprit and punish him. J. Edgar would have been proud.

The crimes? Getting illegal access to company equipment (the Xerox machine), stealing company property (copy paper), and insubordination (perhaps the greatest sin of all). Well, the search went on for a couple of months with no success. In the meantime, two more editions hit the street. Now everyone, including top management was reading the underground newsletter,

with an aim, of course, to getting a clue to the author (but also, we suspect, trying to find out if they were part of the latest edition). They never caught the culprit.

In the meantime, however, the union and management joint steering committee formed a communication committee to design and oversee a new communication process for the plant. The process was to open up lines of communication, create a two-way dialogue between employees and management and generally begin to educate and inform employees. The committee decided that they needed to staff the communication function. So, they wrote a job description and conducted a search for just the right person to fill the job.

About 30 people applied for the position. There were salaried and hourly people with education from 8th grade through master's degrees. The committee reviewed application materials, talked with people in the plant about the candidates, and interviewed the five finalists.

Guess who one of the finalists was? Right . . . our mystery writer! Did anyone know that? Nope. He was buried among the talent. How did we know he was there? Somebody leaked the information to us. We just watched the process to see how far he would get before being set aside for a better-educated or more experienced candidate. Well, like a surprise walk-on in Big Ten football, Louie kept making the cuts. They were down to the five finalists.

At this point, the committee did an interesting thing. They took the list of finalists around the plant asking employees whom, among this list, they would trust to do the job. Guess who got the best ratings? Of course, the mystery man, Louie. He was more widely known than any of the other candidates and generally was seen as someone who knew what was going on and would tell it straight if he got the chance.

Well folks, this is America. Louie got the job. Louie, among other things, had a great deal of pride, so he began taking courses to acquire computer skills (after all he was graduating from pencil to Macintosh) and to improve his grammar (spell check would help a lot on the other area). Louie turned out to be as good as everyone predicted. He fought to get out information that management wanted to withhold and would only print what he could verify as the truth. It was touch-and-go for a while, but truth, justice, and the American Way won out.

We're not sure if anyone wondered why the underground newsletter failed to appear. I guess Louie quit writing it when he got the editor's job because he thought it represented a conflict of interest. And, if nothing else, Louie was true to his values. That's part of what made him good at this job. He wanted everyone to know the truth and to see if anyone would do something about the craziness. Most of all, he wanted to do something about it. Louie did. The plant did. And they are different and better for it.

As a postscript, Louie held this job as a bargaining unit employee. After he had been in the role about three years, the plant went through a downsizing process. Because he had done such a great job, when Louie's name came up for layoff, management stepped forward and offered to make him a salaried employee in order to keep him in the job. Nice gesture.

Louie turned them down. The values that guided his work in communication also guided his life. He turned down the offer of a salaried position because he thought that it represented an unfair advantage. As a member of the bargaining unit, he had to take his layoff just like the other brothers and sisters. So, the very set of principles that made Louis so great at his job also resulted in his exit from the business.

Wherever you are, Louie, thanks for the lessons. We need more teachers like you.