

“Honey, I shrunk the product manager...”

There was a time when everything moved to a grand plan. I was a product manager for a good-sized outdoor company. With a few keyboard strokes, a dot-matrix printer and a reliable fax connection; I could move ridiculous amounts of material, have complicated test garments made or get any kind of validation, usually overnight. Life was good and the product cycle smooth, yet still I complained about how hard it was for “me” to make product. “If only the (fill in the blank) would listen to me...” I would constantly whine in our management meetings; “I told them weeks ago...” Blinded by power and handcuffed by ignorance, I became the omnipotent critic, as I was both the “customer” and the “creator.” It was extremely easy to lose sight of everything—except my vacation time.

Not anymore. Now I’m a part of an effort to make product in the USA. Our mission: small scale production of a line of about eight styles; fleece hoodies and insulated outerwear, mixed in with a canvas pack or two. The new handcuffs? Our American-made product is constructed from American materials, and there isn’t anyone



to fax marching orders to anymore but myself. Karma’s a tough nut, isn’t it?

I tell my friends that it’s like the movie where the guy gets shrunk down to the size of a pea and gets lost in the backyard. He can’t go anywhere or do anything and no one can hear him. Making product in this country is very similar. For me it is a tiny struggle amidst a once great industry, where establishing something as simple as communication comes with jubilation.

The names of my customer service reps are on a big white board in the office. I often scan

the names before going to sleep at night. “My elastic cord is safe,” I’ll mutter before turning out the light, “Susan got my email.” It is a relief to find and trust people to do business with, and they have quickly become family. Now that I’m on the ground floor, my present title is janitor-slash-truck-driver; I more clearly see the entire manufacturing team, and the importance of each member.

Sam is a middle-aged Cambodian who has been fixing sewing machines for 22 years. Every week I sit with him for a couple of hours as he works on my small fleet

of machines. A brilliant man, he calmly explains the magic inside the workhorses while he brings them back to life. He knows that we need him desperately, and I always have the faint feeling that he has chosen us, not the other way around.

What I can’t shake is the realization that there was a Sam in every overseas factory in my past. A web of people working for, and with other people, who created what I considered “my” product. I felt big as I used to pull those levers of power with short, terse messages that sent planes flying and ships sailing. Now, I am simply a junior member, and I rely completely on the team. It is far-flung customer service reps and kindly sewing machine mechanics that get the job done. It is a humbling realization.

The “grand plan” was a chimera, a flow chart of what-should-happen-by-when that obscured what was really going on. My new role gives me a clear view of just how too large for my britches I was, and how making apparel is far more than a chain of commands. ●

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