

A Fight for the Future of Finishing Shops

The driving force of changes is often a generational battle, too.

There is a quiet battle being waged on the shop floors and in the conference rooms of finishers all over the country. It's a fight for the future of every shop. Stakes, emotions and tension are high.

Representing one side in the conflict is an individual we'll call Fred. A seasoned veteran of the finishing floor, Fred has been a loyal employee for 30 years. He has seen everything. In certain respects he is viewed as a leader—without a fancy title—among some of his coworkers on the floor. Fred keeps his head down, stays out of trouble and does things the way they've always been done. Why not? After all, these methods have always worked in the past. They are tried and true. If Fred could have it his way, he would calmly ride out the few years he has remaining until retirement, which he was on track to do until guess who showed up

Jessica. With a four-year engineering degree from a well-respected local university and three years in the company's corporate management trainee program, Jessica is full of fire and eager to drive change on the finishing floor.

To the long-time floor employees, it is almost like Jessica speaks another language. She uses new-fangled terms like continuous improvement, current state and future state. She talks of the importance of 5S; of Sorting, Shining, Setting to Order, Standardizing, and Sustaining Change. Annoying? Yes. But at least those terms are in English! Lately she's been speaking in tongues, articulating bizarre Asian-sounding terms like Kanban, Gemba, Poka-yoke, Andon and—this one beats all—Hoshin Kanri.

If all of this weren't bad enough, she keeps trying to get Fred and his co-workers to go along with her crazy ideas. She talks of the importance of "employee involvement" and of listening to all stakeholders. She has scheduled a "Kaizen event"—whatever that is—for next week. She even asked Fred to come to the first meeting to provide input on the "current state value stream map." Oh brother!

Fred has seen it all before, though. Quality Circles, total quality management, insourcing, outsourcing, vertical integration, core competency focus, reengineering, and the list goes on. He chalks Jessica's ideas



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and efforts up to just another flavor of the month—a storm he and his co-workers have to weather before returning to the old ways of doing things. Since senior management seem to be giving Jessica their support though, Fred knows he will have to patiently survive the new direction through its inevitable failure. At times during meetings, he will even nod his head in pretend agreement and half-heartedly help implement some new initiatives. "Just give it time," he quietly tells his co-workers, "and this lean mumbo-jumbo

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will go the way of every other goofy idea management has come up with over the years.”

But Jessica is keen to Fred’s stealthy efforts to make her feel uncomfortable and to undermine her efforts: his occasional all-knowing chuckle at new ideas; the condescending way he tells her how, even if lean could work in other companies, “it will probably never work here.”

Fred doesn’t realize it, but Jessica sees right through him. She has been coached by her mentors that every company, every plant and every department has at least one Fred. That among every team there is one who just can’t be won over. She knows better than to waste much energy or time trying to convince Fred of the merits of her ways.

And Fred underestimates Jessica’s tenacity. Jessica has the best interest of the company at heart and is confident she is right. She walks the floor every day and sees the opportunities to reduce waste, improve line density, increase line speed, and to study and solve re-work.

She believes that today’s marketplace is much more competitive, much more global, than the one of 30 and 40 years ago. She knows that today it takes more than good intentions and hard work to be successful. Rather, success in the present day requires change, creativity and a relentless pursuit of continuous improvement. To Jessica, this conflict with Fred is at most a minor distraction when compared with the importance of bringing the finishing operation into the 21st century to ensure its future survival and success. With the support of her superiors and a “never-say-die” attitude, she is more than convinced she can do so, in spite of the likes of Fred.

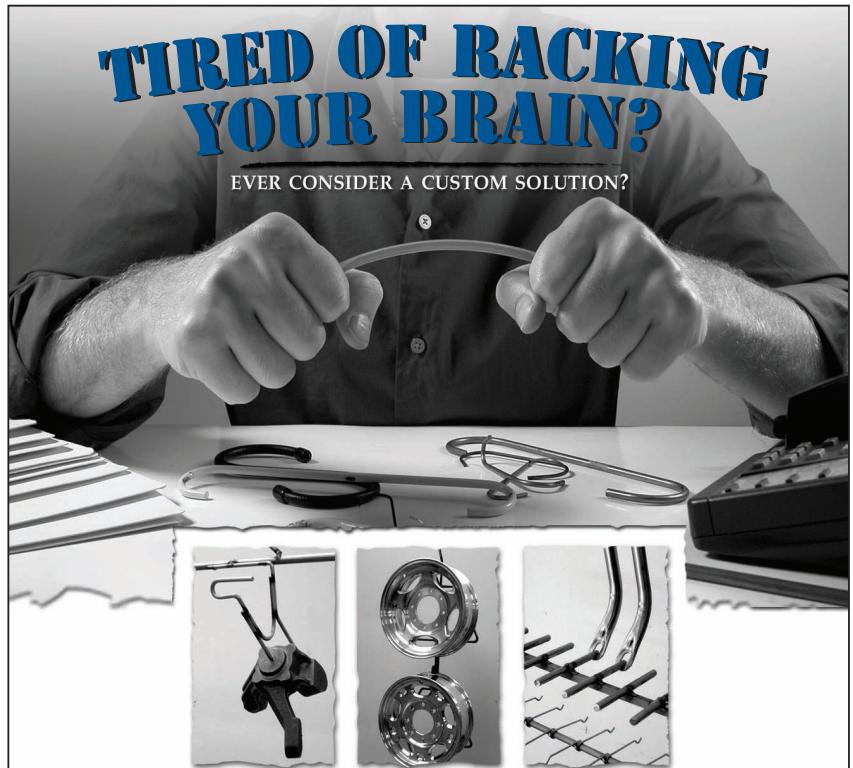
There’s a battle being waged between Jessicas and Freds on the shop floors and in the conference rooms of finishers all over the country. I hate to spoil the ending for you but I’m going to:

Jessica wins. ■

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