

Embracing The Role

by Jeff Reinke, Editorial Director, IMPO

One of the great American traditions is that of embracing the plight of the little guy, the underdog, the one with all the odds stacked against them. I think it's because even in these seemingly impossible conditions they're committed to doing whatever it takes and are unwilling to yield to theoretically superior opposition. While we love the story and readily root for everyone from the Spartans in *300* to the 1980 U.S. Olympic Hockey team, how many of you are ready to go beyond just being a fan and truly embrace that role?

In most matters regarding foreign relations and world economics, the U.S. has been in a dominant position for as long as I've been alive. While events of the last year have reinforced the position of U.S. manufacturing on a global scale, most close to the situation realize that we've been inching our backs closer and closer to the wall for quite some time. Now, we're out of room. There's no where to turn and no other options than to accept and embrace what has become our new place in the global manufacturing scene - the underdog.

This means we must embody a number of characteristics common to such a role:

1. We never give up. First and foremost, this country is built on a solid base of manufacturing. While many would prefer to ignore this fact because it entails getting one's hands a bit dirty, it's the truth and should be a source of pride. I can speak from experience as my home state of Wisconsin has lost nearly 32,000 manufacturing jobs in the last year. Many of which met with little resistance or even a whisper of government assistance as manufacturers not only sought greener pastures overseas, but within the continental 48. Iowa and the Southeastern part of the U.S. seemed to benefit from a defeatist attitude towards manufacturing that's not exclusive to Wisconsin.

2. We take calculated chances. Okay, anybody who has seen the movie *Major League* knows that very few base runners will be able to score from second on a sacrifice bunt. But if the score is tied and you have someone as fast as Willie Mays Hayes, than it's worth the risk. The manufacturing parallel to me is that if you're locked into one marketplace, you have to diversify. Very few manufacturers will continue to survive if they serve only one master in one marketplace. Expanding design capabilities and careful capital investment will both be key to future growth. I'm not advocating expansion for the sake of expansion, but when an opportunity presents itself, we need to go for it.

3. We focus on what we do best. While diversification will be key to growth, U.S. manufacturers also need to remember their core strengths. In other words, if you manufacture oil filters, look to expand outside of automotive applications, but trying to incorporate brake pads is probably going too far.

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None of these concepts are all that revolutionary, but has been lacking is the proper mindset in executing them. I think the time has come where we need to come out of the corner swinging. Instead of talking about what must be done we must push our strategies forward. They've heard our bark, now it's time to show that U.S. manufacturing hasn't lost its bite.

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