

Progress through People:
The Story of Weasler Engineering

By

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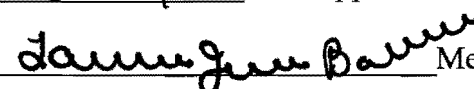
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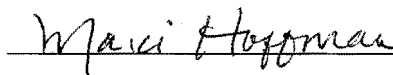
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Introduction: Why Stories Are Worth Listening To

Why would you want to write about this place?

I was often asked this question by co-workers who were more than willing to help me with the job of shadowing, profiling, interviewing, and researching as I set out to discover more about Weasler Engineering in West Bend, Wisconsin, where I have worked for the past eight years. In my time at Weasler, they have shared countless and remarkable stories about themselves regarding their work, their family, their joys, their battles, their accomplishments, their beliefs, their biases, and their regrets. They have also shared their ideas on how to make the company a better place, and also, in their own little way, the world.

Many of these roughly four hundred working adults spend eight to sixteen hours a day away from families and personal life since numerous jobs at Weasler require it, and they work overtime because they are asked and/or because they want/need the money. American workers are chained to their computers, reading and replying to hundreds of emails a week, answering phone messages, creating and calculating spreadsheets, producing documents and slide shows despite fatigued wrists and necks. They are operating machines, handling cold, heavy steel, painting parts, emptying hoppers, packing boxes, and pounding hard floors, while suffering from aching backs, shoulders, feet, and knees. But they march on, some of them work a second job, have been doing that for years, and rarely complain about it.

I cannot count how many times I have heard at this work place, and others I have worked at previously, how unimportant workers feel since they are “just a factory worker” or “so low on the org (organization) chart that they don’t matter.” Many have mentioned that they feel awkward and uncomfortable around those who have a degree and make more money than they do. Others have revealed that they would not even attend a high school class reunion since they think they would be looked down upon for not having “made it.”

Some think people who sit behind a desk all day do nothing because they are not engaging in physical labor. And others believe that all shop people do all day long is walk around, visit the bathroom more than needed, read the company bulletin boards too often, talk to their buddies too much, and engage in as little work as possible.

These same workers who have confided over the years also mentioned numerous times how alone they feel and don’t know where to turn to in the company when they have an idea or just need to have a crucial conversation because of a “bad boss” or “because nobody listens or cares.”

But why, I would go home wondering on my drive from work? Why do they have these misconceptions about co-workers? I know a few are chronic complainers and a few are lazy, but is that all they see? Why would workers feel so insignificant with all they accomplish during their work week and their lives in general? They have mechanical and technical skills that help businesses thrive, turn a profit, and make a product that many in the world benefit from. They earn a paycheck, and the company would not employ someone whose position was thought to be unnecessary. They are

funny, smart, fascinating, and skilled people with families, homes, summer homes (cottages, they remind me) on lakes, cars, and scars from tragedies they have survived and grown from. These are people who contribute to products that are sold all over the world and that help others do their job better and safer so why, why, I would ask myself over and over again, are there such misconceptions and feelings of unimportance in the workplace?

In my narrative nonfiction thesis, “Progress through People: The Story of Weasler Engineering,” I tell a story about a small town manufacturing company that turns into a corporate giant. One of my goals, then, in this creative writing process, was to see if I could find out, grasp it, and help show Weasler workers that their labor is not in vain, that they have value and influence, and that they contribute to their work, and others, in so many ways.

Another goal I had in this writing process was to understand workplace positions and relationships and how they contribute to helping make a company weaker or stronger. If I am able to gain a better understanding, I can assist in providing a big picture mentality and a workplace scrutiny so we, that is, workers (myself included), can realize the repercussions of selfish actions and the benefits of selfless ones and how they affect us and the company as a whole. Too often in the workplace, there are long-standing grudges, silly biases, or elite-types who think they know better than all and are not willing to listen and help others. Talking over others, shouting, interrupting, and not hearing or caring about what another has to say only creates hard feelings. And refusing to do simple workplace tasks that would assist co-workers weakens a company.

When this happens, and individual agendas are put before what is best for the company and its workers, work is delayed or stopped and relationships are sabotaged, spirits are broken and the company crumbles from within. Too often we take things personally at work and stop talking, laughing, and focusing on the big picture—what is best for customers, the product, and the people who make it.

By profiling six Weasler workers, two from the union, two from the company, and two from the new corporation that acquired the company, my intent was to write about what kind of work these people engage in all day. For instance, do they really just walk around and read the cork boards to waste time, as many are accused of? Do they really just sit around, drink coffee, and chat all day? Do they really just occupy fancy offices and conference rooms and make hasty decisions without much thought or input from anyone else? Are they really just out to collect a pay check? Too often there is talk that union workers are lazy and try to get away with doing as little as possible and office workers and management are lazy since all they do is sit behind a desk all day. There are also accusations that they are know-it-alls and out-of-touch because they are rarely seen on the shop floor.

By shadowing workers and portraying their thoughts, I hoped to present a sort of day in the life of the American worker in the twenty-first century at a global company that has survived and continues to thrive in a county that saw over ten thousand workers lose their jobs over a short period of time. What makes this company so different? When four major companies within walking distance from Weasler Engineering have either shut their production doors or moved out of town/country, how is it that Weasler

continues to increase its workforce? Weasler has a reputation for investing in new machines, but why is it that the new machines are not replacing workers? Some believe that with an increase of technology, their jobs will disappear. Instead, Weasler is actually creating more jobs and increasing the workload and skill of employees.

Another goal was to read, research, and discover from others what they thought about being sold by remote investors who were mainly concerned with making a profit. Also, what were employees' thoughts about being purchased by a corporate giant that was anything but remote? I wanted to understand workers' fears, apprehensions, and hopes by getting it on paper and discussing it with them at their workstations.

For sixty years, this company has run at a certain discreet momentum. Not many have heard of Weasler Engineering. They may drive by the company every day on the busy highway where it is situated, but Weasler does not have high profile advertising like the Gehl Company, another Washington County company, does at Milwaukee's Miller Park. It does not make common household items such as wallets like Amity, cookware as Regal Ware, or bread makers like the West Bend Company (all companies, unfortunately, that are no longer big producers and places for much employment in Washington County). Like the hidden driveline it produces, Weasler Engineering maintains a low-key but powerful place in business and industry that people want to work at and remain at for decades. But, would all that change in 2011 when a high profile, multi-national corporation called Actuant purchased Wealer Engineering?

Finally, my last goal in the literary nonfiction process was to study the past and present leadership of the company and immerse myself in getting to know the company's

founder, Tony Weasler, since I have heard hundreds of stories about him. Although I have never met him, I wanted to get to know him through his employees' eyes and also through company and city archives. I wanted to discover what defined him as a leader and what defines one now, in 2014? Are they the same, can we come up with a prototype, a formula that workers and other companies can learn from? And, are we all called to be leaders in some way? When Weasler gives tours to customers and other companies, can what they see be used as a model? When we obtain feedback from them, do they learn anything from us, do we learn anything from them? Finally, does what happens at Weasler transcend business?

Ideal readers of this reporting are those in the manufacturing industry. According to *Training within Industry* materials that were developed to give supervisors management tools in job relations and instruction, since World War II, unsuccessful manufacturing facilities have been suffering from the same problems. Those problems are directly related to lack of poor training, poor job relations, and poor leadership. In 1944, skilled men were called to battle, thus leaving their manufacturing jobs. Women left their homes to work in industries. Leaders in business and industry scratched their heads and wondered why these skilled and successful household managers did not understand the mechanical jobs they undertook in industry. After many errors, business and industry leaders realized that if they listened to their workers, gave them proper training, and attempted to implement their ideas, they would all be more successful. Women wanted better training and the *Training Within Industry* program was developed in order to provide management with tools to assist others in being successful in the

workplace. These tools consisted of simple training methods in procedures and listening sessions to aid in job relations. The Weasler story attempts to show how the implementation of this philosophy can build a company foundation, grow it, develop a workforce, and sustain a business for future global growth.

Genre Overview

In the creative nonfiction genre, experiments and immersions seek to answer big picture questions such as those posited above and also “What would happen if...” or “What’s it like to...” as Eileen Pollack notes in *Creative Nonfiction*. George Orwell, in 1933, wrote about his experiments in *Down and Out in Paris and London*. By washing dishes in an upscale French restaurant and living in England’s shanty towns, Orwell used the experimentation process to help gain insight into what it was like to be a part of a world that he was so far removed from as a child (Pollack 137).

Pollack offers that some experiments may suggest a hilarious message, too, but they still require close examination and some kind of engagement like Ann Hodgman’s piece that reported on the taste of dog food. In Hodgman’s writing, readers discover that she actually prepared some dog food in a skillet, tasted it, and reported that it did not taste too favorably. So, from her experiment (which may appeal to dog owners or to anyone who thought about trying dog food), she obtained first-hand knowledge and perhaps stopped someone from trying it and gagging on it (Hodgman 159).

Writers who use immersion journalism are able to uncover answers to central questions by immersing themselves in an occupation, place, or task. Sometimes

immersion journalism requires the writer to be able to transform so the researching, reporting, and writing processes help the journalist and the readers learn, help solve dilemmas, and answer universal questions.

In *Newjack: Guarding Sing Sing*, for example, Ted Conover is able to answer central and serious questions such as: What type of person becomes a correctional officer? Do they have to be brutal people? What is the job of a correctional officer really like? Are our prison systems engaged in genuine rehabilitation while prisoners are serving their time? Conover does this by getting a job as a prison guard and writing about his experiences. Reporting from immersion writers can aid in answering age-old questions and offer some kind of resolution to, as in Conover's case, the American prison system and its processes of reform and rehabilitation. For readers, immersion writing may assist in how to think, without dictating what they should think. Whatever the topic, however, immersion journalism is able to help explore central questions and come up with answers that help readers rethink a topic.

In Mark Kramer and Wendy Call's anthology of narrative nonfiction writing advice, *Telling True Stories*, we learn that the reporter or narrator in this genre is the voice that gives readers the story as if they were there themselves witnessing it. The reporter reports for duty, gathers the news from observation and others on the scene, takes notes, synthesizes the information, and finally puts it in a readable story form. The narrator does the same and chooses "how close to stand to the action" (Hart 103).

The one telling the story must also be modest and willing to act as a student. "The reader roots for a humble narrator," Conover writes in "Participatory Reporting:

Sending Myself to Prison,” and emphasizes that when a reporter makes the decision to report about someone else’s world, the reporter does not have to be the expert (36). In fact, Conover advises that there should be times of awkwardness, incompetence, and learning, and narrators can gain more insight if they are willing to let go and let others they are reporting on teach them (36).

Staying for ten months in Sing Sing, Conover was able to learn the trade of a corrections officer and was taught not only by fellow officers and supervisors, but he also allowed inmates to teach him. He writes that he not only learned how to walk with inmates, but he also learned how to negotiate with them. And, although his stint was short, his full immersion and his willingness to try to understand the men behind the bars allowed him to help bridge the inmate-officer gap and form genuine friendships, such as in the following scene:

All he wanted was his watch back. The shaved-headed man, of Indian or Pakistani descent, had been unfailingly courteous to me, which was the only reason I was trying to help him with this problem....Trying to get his watch could have turned into a wild-goose chase...Finally, after two phone conversations, I learned that he *was* supposed to have his watch by now...

“Thank you, CO!” he said beaming, and I felt I had made a friend, which was a good thing (Conover 236).

Conover’s writing under the influence of others’ perspectives allowed him to try to put himself in the place of the inmates he tended to at Sing Sing. He tried to bring some balance of strength and civility to a severe and vulgar establishment by not taking

the verbal and physical blows he endured personally and by not participating in the humiliating games that were played by both inmates and his fellow officers. He tried to bring some sensibility to their craziness by treating the prisoners he was in charge of with respect and dignity in order to build their trust, learn about their life, and tell their story.

Like Conover's *Newjack*, Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* is another piece of literary journalism that illustrates human behavior under extreme conditions. Urrea, a border boy himself, retraced the steps of twenty-six desperate and eager men who wanted to cross a desert and dangerous border to go to work in the United States. Urrea utilizes setting to show what these men had to endure--border patrols and harsh desert conditions--to ultimately find work picking oranges once they got out of the desert and crossed the border:

In the desert, we are illegal aliens...Heat Exhaustion. Your fever is spiking now, and as with the flu, you have gotten more and more ill. Headaches. You get nauseous, you want to vomit. If you vomit, you lose more fluids. You are not only clumsy, but enervated. Your body is weak, and your will is slipping. Your tongue is wood...This is a good place for the infirm among you to have their heart attacks (Urrea 120, 124).

By capturing the humanity of migrants through his descriptions, Urrea was able to reveal to the reader the emotions and perils the twenty-six were trying to survive while attempting to obtain work. He was able to take a highly emotional piece and construct it

so the reader could make some sense of it and, in doing so, was able to show the inhumane side of the desert.

These two books are relevant to my project since I can draw parallels from both. For instance, Conover was employed at Sing Sing and got to know and understand his co-workers and the inmates. He was able to establish a routine by spending many months with his subjects, thus, he got to know them on a personal basis and obtain their stories. I can relate to his participatory reporting since I have been working at the place I reported on for eight years. I have gotten to know many of my co-workers on a personal basis through the company learning center where I am employed. I also visit the shop floor regularly to work with employees on continuous improvement projects and am able to hear their stories while working. Like Conover, who kept a writing pad nearby and took notes when he was alone, I have a daily journal and jot things down if something of particular interest happens in the workplace.

Urrea, too, helped me understand how important it is to give life to setting. In the descriptions in his book he gave life to his setting, the desert, and it became a sort of character. In my project, I have attempted to do the same by giving a candid portrayal of the human side of manufacturing and how this particular company makes it all work despite machine breakdowns, layoffs, furloughs, wage freezes, lack of work ethic, and controversy. I have tried to make the setting—this factory—come alive.

Project Description

What I think I have accomplished in choosing to write about the company I work for is, first of all, a better knowledge of the company's history. As a corporate trainer, I work with employees to help them improve their knowledge on various workplace topics, and years before starting this project (and always in the back of my mind), I have wanted to improve my knowledge of company history. Upon hearing that I was working on a Weasler story, a co-worker took me into the company's archive room and suggested I check out some of the materials. I turned giddy after I saw these organized resources because I knew I would be able to delve into its history of successes, trials, products, and its workforce, and I am grateful that this project has forced me to do that.

This has been a timely lesson since, for the last several months and on a weekly basis, we have been scheduling new employee orientations and are implementing a company story during the onboarding process. Albeit brief, it focuses on the past, present, and future of the company and is used as a learning and retention tool during said orientations. The company wants to keep its people, so our thinking is why not share a story with them and include them in the company's future.

Next, working on this project has helped me gain more insight into the manufacturing process and a renewed appreciation for the people I work with. Since we do a lot of mentoring and coaching in my department, this process has helped me gain a better understanding and an improved pair of ears. By engaging in close readings in previous classes and learning about immersion journalism, I was able to apply concepts I had forgotten or fresh ones I had learned to my little world. Creative nonfiction writing is a challenge for many reasons, and I chose this genre because it emphasizes having the

characters in the story tell their story the way they see it. In *Telling True Stories*, Roy Peter Clark explains this position from John McPhee:

The nonfiction writer is communicating with the reader about real people in real places. So if those people talk, you say what those people said. You don't say what the writer decides they said...[Y]ou don't get inside their heads and think for them (169).

A recurrent theme throughout creative nonfiction reporting is that a story "must be located; it must have a sense of place." Throughout my revision process, I emphasized this sense of place to ground the characters, but also to give the story a "geographical heart" (Hull 42).

For instance, throughout my reporting process, the physical building of the company, the county it is located in, and the immediate neighborhood it is a part of were all featured in several ways and developed a pulse. The building, where the majority of the story is set, became bigger with three additions, as the business grew, life inside of it did too; the county showed weariness as jobs were lost in nearby companies; the neighborhood changed from desolate farm country to a noisy machine shop with scads of people descending on it for hours at a time. And, with this particular business, since the owner was there so often and got to know and love the people that worked for him, it became his lifeblood--he had to be around it and felt like he was missing out on the life it brought if he was away too long.

Another reason I chose creative nonfiction was because I like how it involves the senses which aid in the development of scene, setting, and character. In *Telling True Stories*, Mark Kramer offers:

Find the right scene details through careful sensory reporting. Sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste will allow you to set strong scenes, which in turn develop a sense of place in your writing (27).

Along with sensory writing, my notes from the Forms of Literary Nonfiction (English 709) class I took in spring 2012 emphasize getting in someone else's shoes and using a humanistic approach to show and tell one's story. I found that advice very helpful and truthful since I was able to job shadow the subjects for this project and work right alongside some of them. My attempts to report on the mechanical processes they use to program a machine, load a part, and read a blueprint became a bit more familiar since I could be in and around the processes. Also, I was able to see, feel, and experience some of the soreness they felt in their muscles and joints; some of the fatigue in their necks and arms. They let me in and taught me.

Research and Writing Process

My research for this project involved the standard techniques of immersion reporting: interviews, background reading, and journaling. One aspect of the creative process I used in my reporting was interviewing a balance of union/nonunion workers from Weasler and Actuant, the company that bought Weasler in 2011. Some I interviewed right at their work stations at Weasler as I shadowed them. Also, after their

shift, they were able to sit down with me in the company learning center where I had questions prepared and sometimes typed their answers as they spoke so as not to miss the details they were describing. I was able to follow-up with them during the work week if there was something I failed to ask them or if I needed more clarification. I also went to Actuant's corporate headquarters and did some interviewing there. I met one of Tony Weasler's initial seven workers at his home and conversed with him and his wife for a couple hours, recording our conversation. I telephoned others who used to work at Weasler to obtain more insight regarding Tony's early years at Pick Industries and when his own business took off. I had dozens of phone conversations with three people who knew Tony very well, but who now live out of state. I had a dedicated notebook that I used to jot down notes from conversations, recorded and unrecorded.

My research also entailed visiting city, county, and company archives along with internet sites and books in print. These sources helped me gain historical facts about how Weasler affected the community, county, state, country, and the global market it serves. Finally, I kept a daily journal (field notes) and used some of those stories to help shape Tony's character.

My purpose for my research and writing was to gain more of an understanding of the history of Weasler Engineering, its products, and the people who make them so I could draw some conclusions regarding its success. I wanted to find out how an inventor's mind works and what kind of character starts, builds, and retains such a successful business. Within my efforts to understand Weasler's foundation, I wanted to discover what Weasler's winning formula was. What I discovered was that the small-

town inventor and entrepreneur endorsed learning, growth and relationships by promoting from within and by supporting his workers with his daily visits to their workstations and impromptu listening sessions. Most of his problems were solved on the floor, with his people, listening to their stories. This was his recipe for success, and I believe that if American businesses possessed and acted on this philosophy, American manufacturing would endure and prosper for future workers.

Chapter I

Morning Shuffle

Joe Broecker rose from a deep sleep at 1:45 in the morning, changed into his chore clothes, and went to the loafing barn to start his morning chores. There, he fed the cows their usual silage, hay, ground feed, and protein. Next, he readied the main red barn to let in the cows that had been grazing in the pasture all night by checking to make sure all doors were shut so the cattle couldn't get out once they were in.

As he does every morning, he went out into the dark to start rounding them up. He called the cows in by saying "Come-boss," and most of the older cows came upon hearing his morning greeting, but the others that didn't Joe found by flashlight and chased into the barn. After they were secured, he scraped the alleys clean and sprayed and fogged the barn to kill the flies that had bonded with the cows overnight in the pasture. While the cows breakfasted on protein and shell corn, Joe readied the milk equipment by carrying the units out to the cows and starting up the vacuum pumps and milk coolers. Then, he filled some buckets with warm water to give his cows their morning bath. He washed each cow, dried them off with baby diapers, and put the milking units on the teats. Since they begin an early morning rumba by prancing and kicking if the milking units are on too long, Joe removed them after about three minutes. He began this predawn barn dance at four-thirty and ended the milking party just after six. Then, he hurried home, washed up, changed his clothes, ate breakfast, and left for his day job as a machinist at Weasler Engineering, a power transmission manufacturing company located in West Bend, Wisconsin since 1951.

Farmer Joe, as he is sometimes called, is a green-eyed, five foot five, one hundred and thirty-five pound George W. Bush look alike. Once during George W.'s presidency, Joe wore a suit and tie and combed his hair to go to a wedding in northern Wisconsin, and everyone wanted to have their picture taken with him when he walked into the reception hall.

"I had pictures taken that night with the wedding couple, the rest of the wedding party, and lots of the invited guests," Joe laughingly remembered.

This wasn't Joe's first association with celebrity, though. In 1956, some real celebrities visited Joe's family farm. When chores were completed, his grandfather and father would sometimes take a ride into the nearby unincorporated town of Kohlsville to socialize at the corner tavern. One day at the tavern in walked Hank Aaron, Eddie Matthews, and Warren Spahn. As these big leaguers sat down for some suds, they got to talking to Joe's kin and learned that they owned a farm a mile up the road. Hank expressed interest in the farm and asked if he could see it, so the veteran cow herders led the major league hitters to the family farm. After getting a tour of the farm, Hank was interested in purchasing it and keeping Joe's family on it to run it.

"I was six years old," Joe said, "and as I recall, Hank was a nice, courteous person. He liked the farm and wanted to buy it, but he wanted my dad and grandpa to run it and my dad said no. I mean, my dad isn't going to work for someone else, regardless if it was for Hank Aaron, Warren Spahn, Eddie Matthews or anybody."

Joe's father kept farming until the 1970s, and in 1982 Joe bought the farm from his dad at the age of thirty-two. By that time, he had already invested \$65,000 in the farm, money he had saved from his factory job at Weasler.

Joe punched in at 6:50 that morning as he had done for the past forty-four years. He got his usual company-supplied cup of coffee at the communal coffee pots by the big, round, cinnamon-colored common sinks, and went to his machines in the spring lok cell. The machines in this cell make spring loks and locking yokes that fit directly on a tractor and power source (driveline) and look like Mickey Mouse ears with holes. The collars on these parts are spring loaded, giving the farmer a fast and safe way to hook and unhook an implement without any tools. In this cell, Joe machines anything that is going to operate the driveline like a motor does. He opened his tool box, readied his tooling for the day's work, and talked to the third shift operator about previous problems encountered during her shift. As usual, the fog horn-like buzzer rang at seven a.m., and Joe began running his machines and checking all the gauging so they fit the yokes. He made any necessary changes and checked every first part that came off each of his machines to make sure they met the specifications on the blueprint—Joe took nothing for granted. As he scrutinized each yoke he kept the machines running-- correcting any problems along the way. Although orders for work in the spring lok cell hadn't changed since yesterday, something else did.

That same morning and approximately four miles away from Joe Broecker's farm, Joe Lentz's alarm went off at five-thirty. As usual, he hit the snooze button several times

before getting up forty-five minutes later. After putting on his work pants, tee, and steel-toed boots, he jumped in his car to make the fifteen minute drive to Weasler in West Bend. Upon arriving at work and making his way through the shop floor past the flowline, big broaches, multi-task cell, and maintenance crypt to the front where the time clock is located, Joe joined in the daily morning banter with his co-workers:

“Hey, you look like crap this morning.”

“Yeah, you look like crap, too.”

After greetings and insults, Joe walked over to the board to discover what positions the lead man set up for the paint and pack department and the crew he works with. Next, he went to the assigned paint line position and began working. This morning, Joe would be starting where the pallets were braced. This included prepping the line so it's ready for each job and making sure guards and anything else the crew needed was on the bench within reach. He retrieved the tools needed that day for the designated jobs such as screw drivers, wrenches, and hammers and checked to make sure there were enough zerks, cap screws, grease, rust inhibitor, Neltex (nylon protector), and graffiti wipes, while strategically placing the essential supplies near the grease guns. He looked around and saw some of the others putting on their hoods, masks, and thin navy blue paint coats readying themselves to paint in the nearby paint booths.

The bench areas and lines, where the workers ready the product for packing, looked like Santa's North Pole workshop: four workers turned screws, greased products, and pounded away like Santa's elves readying toys at the big bench. Two workers at the small bench the scope of the kiddie table at grandma's Christmas dinner greased,

assembled, and secured smaller yokes and shafts with zerks and cap screws. Two others sashayed into the paint booths skillfully painting each part black for better durability in the field. Another wrapped certain parts with large white foam (sometimes referred to as dinosaur tp), placing metal bands around the finished products and gently positioning them into a wooden crate like gifts under the Christmas tree. On the hanger line, another worker hung parts that dangled like precious collectibles on an automatic track, resembling the crawling speed of holiday shopping traffic, waiting to be painted, removed, and shipped to every good customer globally. Finally, two in lead man positions coordinated the synchronicity of it all as well as Kris Kringle himself.

After two hours in their initial positions, the rotation began despite aching feet, weary shoulders, and tired muscles. Two workers slid into the twin paint booths while the other two moved from the west to the east side of the big bench for a change of outdoor scenery since the big overhead door was open that morning. One could see the west parking lot and the sun bouncing off the windows of employee cars from this side along with mature trees and blue skies. The other two workers from the small bench moved over to the big bench while the one that hung parts rotated to the small bench to assemble and grease other parts. Similar to last minute holiday shopping, this routine had a dizzying yet purposeful effect.

“My job is not boring,” Joe noted. “There is always something going on in the paint shop.”

On this particular morning, as Joe changed positions from organizing tools to small bench assembly, there was even more going on than usual.

If this were a typical travel day for Dick Preston, his morning would have started with an alarm ring at four-thirty at his home in Sussex, Wisconsin since his flights were usually scheduled for seven. On a normal travel day, after having zipped and loaded his luggage into his BMW, Dick would have made the forty minute drive to the airport and arrived an hour ahead of time. During the flights, he would have gotten comfortable in the seat and would have read some things for work, made notes, and finished planning the activities he wanted to accomplish on his trips. Upon arriving at his destination of Philadelphia, Dallas, Fresno or any of the other Weasler sales territories at his scheduled time (barring delays or missed flights), a friendly Weasler salesman would have met Dick at the airport so they could drive together and discuss business regarding customers before meeting the first one of the day. A meeting with a customer typically lasted two to four hours, and Dick and the salesman would have taken customers to lunch to get to know them better and help develop a relationship. Depending on the time of the flight, the two would have lunched at a nearby restaurant with the customer immediately and then would have had meetings to discuss business in general, concerns, and answer questions. After these afternoon and early evening conversations, there would have been dinner with reps or sometimes with customers, and then Dick would have been dropped off at a hotel about nine p.m. The next morning a rep would have met Dick at seven-thirty and would have driven to the next customer on the itinerary. The meetings would have begun again with business discussions and afterward lunch or, if there wasn't enough time, a drive to the next location for their next set of meetings. Dick would have repeated this not-so-glamorous routine another day, and on the last day of his trip he would have driven to the

airport, arrived in Milwaukee after nine, driven himself home, and arrived there around eleven-thirty ready for bed. After those regimented trips, Dick would have been in the office by eight the next day. Driving to a customer's location was even more taxing since he would have been coming from a day at Weasler and driving six hours to one of the company's bigger customer territories in Illinois, Iowa, or Minnesota to do business just for one day. Those would have been sixteen hour days.

Fifty percent of Dick's work time consisted of traveling the different territories to represent Weasler, and his primary responsibilities were the eleven different territories located in North America. He also travelled a few times a year to work with the company's European division. In addition, Dick was involved with strategic planning and annual budgeting, and attended staff meetings on a regular basis to discuss the business's progress. His involvement with certain larger new business opportunities required reviewing warranty issues, discussing product development and new product needs since the main thrust of his job required everything related to the customers in the Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) division of the company. Weasler's OEM division supplies products to original equipment manufacturers in many markets including agricultural, lawn and turf, construction and industrial markets. John Deere, Case New Holland (CNH), Toro, and Caterpillar are a few of Weasler's OEM customers in these markets.

A pillar of the company both occupationally and physically, Dick is 6'4", two hundred and twenty-five pounds, and dresses mainly in khakis and long-sleeved business shirts with one side pocket. He walks with an approachable stride and co-workers feel

comfortable catching him in the hallway to have an occasional chat. Employed by the company for twenty-six years, this hazel-eyed grandfather of six loves to travel cross country alongside his wife to national parks with the top down on his convertible.

Before being hired by Weasler in 1987, Dick earned a degree in engineering technology and had thirteen years of experience in various engineering positions and two years of experience as a product manager. He was recruited by an employment firm that the engineering company had contracted with while he was employed at Twin Disc in Racine, Wisconsin.

Dick was the first non-family sales engineer at Weasler and notes this with a sense of pride. His success with the company began soon after he started and within a year, he was promoted to manager of applications engineering, where he started the application engineering department at the company in May of 1987. When he began at the company, the agricultural components division was responsible for the OEM and Aftermarket (AM) sales. Like the OEM, AM was another division within the company that supports agricultural, lawn and garden, commercial, and industrial along with tractor and implement dealers, ag machinery service shops, and farm and garden equipment retailers such as Fleet Farm. In 1989, the company formed a vehicular division, and with another promotion in June of 1990, Dick became general manager of the company's agricultural components division, and later the agricultural components and vehicular divisions combined to form the OEM division. Along with that promotion, Dick became a member of the executive staff, and more duties ensued since he then became responsible for OEM.

But this was not a typical travel day.

On the morning Farmer Joe did morning chores and reported to the spring lok cell and Joe L. deflected his alarm and banter and arrived for duty in the paint and pack department, Dick Preston's day began shortly following sunrise. After eating a bowl of cereal and readying himself for work, Dick started his thirty minute drive. He reached work a bit before eight, greeted co-workers on the way to his office, sat down at his desk, logged in, and while waiting for the computer to boot up went to pour himself a cup of coffee at the shared kitchenette twenty feet from his office door. After checking a few emails, Dick attended the all-morning monthly engineering review meeting run by the vice president of engineering, which consisted of appraising the status of all engineering projects. He spent the rest of the day in his office doing normal everyday business.

But how normal would today, tomorrow or the next be since this day—June 2nd, 2011—the company was officially sold?

In the past, Weasler had been looked at by other investors, and workers occasionally saw the company president giving tours to potential buyers. In 1995, the family of the founder, Tony Weasler, sold the company to Code Hennessy & Simmons (CHS) of Chicago. In 2003 it was purchased by Industrial Growth Partners (IGP) of San Francisco. American Securities Capital Partners (ASCP) of New York acquired the company in 2005, and while weathering the changes that new ownership brought, the workers still maintained its mom and pop feel. But today, Actuant Corporation located in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin obtained the company, and some workers were scared, dubious, and suspicious. Back on May 20th, Weasler president Jim Hawkins sent an all

company email informing workers that the company “signed a definitive agreement with Actuant Corporation...a diversified industrial company with operations in more than 30 countries.” So workers knew it was coming.

But today they were officially owned by a corporate giant.

At the wash sinks, using gray gritty soap to scrub the grease and grime from their hands, arms, and fingernails, workers deliberated on the company destiny. While drying their hands on the soft blue pull cloth machines and checking themselves in the attached mirror, machinists chatted how things would be. Reading the smudged and dated notices tacked to the cork on the company bulletin boards, steel workers noted the news. In the ear work first department where the yokes are first bored and then supplied to the other departments around the shop, coolant spat and spewed in the Computer Numeric Controlled (CNC) machines, steel droppings filled hoppers, and union members jawed about the company’s juncture. As aftermarket workers counted parts, packed boxes, and weighed them for shipping, they wondered if their department was going to be moved to a different location since there was talk that Actuant would want more floor space for production. In the miscellaneous cell, the welders and machinists who worked on a variety of small jobs for all departments, asked questions regarding the different ownership while material handlers delivered half baskets full of machine parts and emptied hoppers full of waste to the tune of inquiry and curiosity. In the plastics department, water bubbled and steamed while the guard bells (a safety feature used on the drivelines) boiled for buoyancy as laborers nattered on the sale. The constant velocity department looked for answers regarding the company’s fate while maneuvering between

their CNC machines, and as workers in the stores crypt recorded and shelved parts they, too, wondered if this new company would be able to offer some relief from their aggravation or add to it. The multi-task cell talked over who Actuant was and what they would bring, while the unmatched tube department spouted over the changes that may happen under the new ownership. Paint and pack pondered proprietorship, and the predominant question was is this going to be for the best or would they start shipping work over to China and breaking us up?

In the office, as the realization set in that the company had officially been sold, personnel from purchasing conversed at the copier in between print jobs. Employees from marketing mulled over the missive as engineers and designers descanted over blueprints and Pro E models. Internal Technology (IT) tossed the news about while typing in code and programming language, and the accountants and clerks in finance and payroll parleyed among spreadsheets and forms.

No, today was not a typical travel day, day in the office, cell day, or paint and pack day for Farmer Joe, Joe L., Dick or the rest of the three hundred workers at Weasler.

Chapter II **Blue Velvet**

Where Tony Came From

With a façade of orangey brick and smoky glass, Weasler's 155,000 square foot building that rarely sleeps, operates on twenty-eight acres alongside busy U.S. Highway 45.

Surrounded by three parking lots, grassy areas and picnic benches invite workers for lunch as does a walking trail in a wooded area where deer and other wildlife are occasionally spotted. A short woodsy walk west of the trail is the Wes-Bar Sportsman's Club. Weasler walkers and employees going to and from their cars can hear the nearby shooting and revelry of members during sporting clay season. Three miles north is the village of Kewaskum, one of the gateways to the Kettle Moraine State Forest in Wisconsin, and three miles south is the city of West Bend. Inside, is a noisy machine shop with countless Computer Numeric Controlled (CNC) machines, saws, lathes, cranes, drill presses, milling machines, and broaches—all designed in one capacity or another to aid in the production of a Weasler driveline.

Weasler Engineering, maker of mechanical power transmission products for agricultural and lawn & turf machinery, was not always the significant campus it is today, however. In 1951, it started in a shared smaller building at a busy intersection three miles north of its present location with seven workers and the founder, owner, inventor, and president, Mr. Anthony Valentine Weasler.

Born in 1905, Anthony "Tony" Weasler was raised on a farm in rural Campbellsport, Wisconsin. In 1911, he started attending a one room country school and had to walk four miles round trip, rain or shine to attend. The little school house

accommodated students through third grade, so after third grade Tony's parents enrolled him in Saint Matthew's—the local Catholic school in the village of Campbellsport, a few miles walk or bike ride from his home. The teachers realized how bright Tony was, so they said he could skip a couple of grades and enrolled him in the sixth grade. "I never did find out what I missed," Tony's testimonial at a Marquette University Distinguished Engineering Alumnus award ceremony revealed on April 16, 1991.

As a youngster, he plowed the fields with a horse drawn plow. When the plow got stuck, the horses kept going, and Tony was pulled over the plow because it was hanging out of the reins. After that happened a couple of times he said, "You know, I don't want to spend my life doing this, so I'm gonna go to college."

In 1923, the year Tony graduated from Campbellsport High School, Milwaukee School of Engineering visited him twice at his home on the farm asking him to enroll in their civil engineering program. Tony was interested, yet later an uncle convinced him that Marquette offered a better program, so Tony attended Marquette where he earned two engineering degrees—a civil degree in 1928 and a mechanical degree in 1929. On the occasional weekend when he didn't have to work, Tony made the fifty mile drive from Marquette to the family farm. As a future inventor, his mind was always thinking, and on those drives to and from Milwaukee, Tony was surrounded by farm fields, wondering what he could invent to help the farmer.

Short in stature (5'3") but tall in pursuit, Tony came from a very poor family and did several things to help himself through school. He worked two part-time jobs and skipped breakfast to save money. After attending his morning classes, he worked as a

busboy at the Stratford Arms Hotel in downtown Milwaukee, where lunches for employees were free. Tony also helped in the kitchen doing dishes, peeling potatoes, and putting food on trays to be delivered to diners' tables. He ate gratis at supper time, and in the evenings, after classes, he delivered food to hotel residents. One night while serving a particular guest who had taken up residence in the hotel, Tony learned that the man was an inventor and had two patents. They got to talking, and the inventor discovered that Tony was an engineering student. The man took an interest in Tony's inventive mind and work ethic. He asked Tony about his work at the hotel, classes, and school in general and discovered Tony was a member of several engineering fraternities; clubs such as the school's Engineering Association, where he was vice president; American Society of Civil Engineers (A. S. C. E.), where he was president; and a member of the Engineering Debating Society. With that kind of background, this hotel patron counseled Tony into obtaining a second bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering after he was finished with his civil engineering course work. Tony was interested in this suggestion, and the Dean of Engineering agreed it would be worth Tony's time and effort to pursue, so Tony enrolled. The hotel guest also asked Tony to help him with certain engineering projects since he was presently working on another patent, and Tony did. Sadly, Tony's newfound friend and mentor passed away about half a year later, and his relatives, who were from Chicago, came and took everything the two had been working on together. Tony continued the mechanical engineering degree but was no longer working on patents. He was saddened by the sudden loss of his friend and mentor from the Stratford

Arms Hotel, yet the relationship gave him incentive to pursue a new path in the engineering world.

“My life career was changed by that lucky encounter at the Stratford Arms Hotel,” he said at the Marquette awards ceremony in the Anthony V. and Lucille Weasler Auditorium of the Alumni Memorial Union.

Besides bussing tables, Tony became editor of *The Marquette Engineer*, a quarterly publication that was mailed to the offices of leading local and national industries and to every engineering school in the United States. Tony also was a participant in the Engineering Co-op Program and worked as a co-op student for the Village of Whitefish Bay, the Federal Rubber Company, and the Falk Corporation in Milwaukee, where he gained some practical experience and was later recruited by Karl Pick, owner and senior executive of Pick Industries in West Bend. About two weeks before graduation, one of Tony’s professors called him and said he overheard Mr. Karl Pick telling someone that he was anxious to replace the chief engineer that would be leaving his company shortly. This professor encouraged Tony to set something up at Pick, but Tony questioned his own qualifications. The professor assured him, “You can handle it! You can handle it! For God sake go there!”

With that encouragement and coaching, Tony called Pick Industries, identified himself, and set a meeting date. Upon arrival at Pick and twenty-five minutes into the meeting, Tony was told that the job was his for \$125 a month, which was very good money in 1929 since workers on the production floor were making about two dollars a day or forty dollars a month. Also, he was to begin work on the following Monday at

eight a.m., but because he was in the middle of exams, graduation, and continued to do co-op work at the Falk Corporation, Tony said he could be on the job at eight a.m. but not until the next Monday, since he wanted to give Falk at least a week's notice. Tony went to work for Pick Industries the day after he graduated.

Tony Takes Off

Pick Industries manufactured voluminous items including oil and animal filters, farm unloading boxes for chopped corn and hay, instantaneous water heaters, brake bands, and hub caps. Upon Tony's arrival to the company, Pick had just acquired the Chevrolet and Ford Motor Companies' orders for universal joints (u joints), and this right-out-of-school twenty-four-year-old's first order of business was to make the necessary drawings for this new product. Tony's work consisted of designing the product to fit the companies' trucks and adding them to the production line in order to sell them to dealerships and distribution centers.

In 1930, the manufacturing industry was booming in the city of West Bend and Washington County, and the Pick family along with other prominent families in the area such as the Gehls, O'Mearas, and Zieglers, were responsible for building the West Bend Company (maker of cookware and kitchen appliances), the West Bend Brewery, and other major industries in West Bend. Pick Industries was a diversified company employing six hundred and twenty-five townspeople, and as Pick became more productive and successful, so did Tony. That first decade with Pick, he diligently worked as head engineer, designing parts and products behind his desk in the office. His

engineering expertise and high quality standards helped turn profits for Pick, yet Karl noticed something else in Tony that was not always common in engineers, and that was Tony's ability with people. Karl saw how people responded to Tony. He was not only comfortable with people, he was comfortable with himself, and did not hesitate to ask for input from fellow designers and machinists on the shop floor. He also enjoyed people and looked for ways for all to use their talents to contribute to the business—he didn't want to leave anybody out. His inclusion was contagious and helped turned profits for Pick. Karl knew if Tony could gain more exposure in the company, he could help Pick Industries even more. In 1940, Tony was promoted from chief engineer to General Manager (GM) and Vice President of the company. As GM, one of Tony's responsibilities was coordinating labor and staffing positions.

As if trying to meet customers' orders and managing a manufacturing plant wasn't enough, Tony had to replace the skilled labor lost to the war with prisoners of war. Pick Industries hired two-hundred and fifty German and Austrian POWs captured by Allied Troops. At the time, the United States government decided that instead of keeping captured soldiers in POW camps in Europe, they should be brought to America to work, since the labor shortage brought on by the war effort was hindering American manufacturing.

In 1944, Tony asked Edwin Gerhardt, one of his top foremen at Pick Industries (and later at Weasler Engineering) to work with the German prisoners. Since Edwin spoke German, Tony knew that assigning him to work with the German prisoners that

were brought to Pick would not only help these foreign employees perform better but also the business. They earned a small wage while Tony was an executive.

Upon the POWs arrival at the Pick plant, the guard in charge of feeding the prisoners was seen carrying a small pot of soup from the bus to the plant for the prisoners' lunch. Word came from Europe that American POWs were being mistreated in Europe so in retaliation, those in charge cut down the food given to the POWs at the nearby Rockfield camp. Karl Pick was informed of the rationing of food at the camp and noted that if these men were going to work all day in his plant they should have more to eat. So, he gave the order to purchase a more nourishing meal of bread, sausage, and milk for the POWs who worked at his plant.

There was also a working relationship between the guards and the prisoners. While working in the plant, Edwin witnessed an armed guard dropping his gun and a prisoner bringing it back to him. Some captured German soldiers who were POWs in Rockfield were Nazis, and one in particular who reported for duty at Pick Industries goose stepped off the bus and into the plant showing his allegiance to Hitler. This goose stepper was immediately removed from the plant, taken back to the camp, and given bread and water only.

In addition to losing skilled Pick employees to World War II, working with POWs and all the dynamics involved with that, and trying to turn products into profit, Tony forged ahead and purchased and operated the West Bend Plating Company, since the hubcaps Pick produced needed plating before they could be delivered to customers.

After the war in 1945, however, Karl Pick decided to reduce production on a large number of items. Keeping only the brake shoe and hot water heater parts of the business, Karl sold the sawmill and the drying kiln in Iron River, Michigan. In West Bend, he sold most of the machinery in the building on Rail Road Street. That left the main plant that included the universal joints business that Tony favored and always wanted to develop further. Tony informed Karl that he wanted to purchase the universal joints business and venture out on his own. Karl was opposed to this because he did not want Tony to leave; he did not want to lose his vice president/general manager who was presently running the whole operation even though Pick was downsizing. However, Tony was able to persuade Karl to sell him the universal joints business.

Tony Makes the Leap

After eleven years, Tony decided to resign from his vice president and general manager duties at Pick Industries in 1951 to seek a career in the manufacturing of agricultural universal joints—all on his own.

Tony brought six of Pick's most highly-skilled machinists to help him establish the business he wanted to start. He knew he needed to surround himself with trained workers, but he also realized that it takes a leader to start a new business.

Showing foresight and humility, Tony wanted to improve not only the u-joints business but also his leadership skills, so before venturing on his own, he enrolled in a Dale Carnegie course which emphasized establishing healthy workplace relationships in order for a business to be highly successful—in profits, processes, production, and

people. The course treated getting along with people in everyday business as a fine art, and the main tool used in developing this art form was conversation. The course was taught using parables, and one that instantly struck Tony was about how conversational training affected people that were in his same line of work--engineers. In the parable, these engineers represented two elite groups, the Engineers' Club in Philadelphia and the New York chapter of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers. These engineers realized that if they developed a sincere and humble philosophy they would have highly successful businesses. The course came up with examples to drive this message: the most successful in any occupation were those not only with the technical knowledge that they needed to do their job, but the ones who could articulate their views, guide others, and promote camaraderie between co-workers. Tony listened to stories that he not only found fascinating but that he wanted to embody. For instance, one story Tony heard in the Dale Carnegie course was about an established business owner who, before taking the course, denounced and denigrated his 314 employees. Words of encouragement and helpfulness were not part of his vocabulary, and his employees turned into his enemies. The owner in the parable noted that no one greeted him when he walked through his own establishment—they actually looked the other way as he was approaching—but after implementing the Carnegie concepts his employees became his friends, and even the janitor he employed began to greet him by his first name. This employer increased earnings, relaxation, and happiness not only in his business but in his home.

The class instructor noted that Tony had mastered the course's objectives and expectations and asked him to teach future classes. He did wholeheartedly. He also took

the Carnegie philosophy out of the classroom to construct his business and help build the people who worked for him. He became a master of appreciating others and influencing them with his ears.

After the skillful six agreed to work for Tony, he approached them about forming a union shop since their one and only customer at the time, Allis-Chalmers, also had a union. Besides giving workers a bit more equality and stability, he thought if Weasler was a union shop it would be able to relate more to the unionized workers at Allis-Chalmers. So Tony's steadfast nucleus joined the Allied Industrial Workers (AIW-Local 144) at their first rented location.

Willard Kaun was one of the original six who had seen a lot before he was handpicked by Tony from Pick Industries to help run his new business. Prior to his careers at Pick and Weasler, Willard served as a sergeant in the Air Force where he negotiated repair part supplies for trucks and staff cars with other services when he was stationed in Okinawa for two and a half years during World War II.

A gentle soul, Willard began working for Pick Industries in 1948, and thus a relationship with Tony Weasler began because Tony occasionally came out to the shop just to chat.

"Tony was chief engineer when he started at Pick," Willard recalled. "But when I was working there he was by then the general manager, and he would come out to the machine shop and we would just talk to each other. I think he liked being around us and the machine shop culture. He bought the machine that I mostly worked on which made

the crosses for the universal joints, and one day just asked if I would be willing to leave Pick and come with him.”

Being one of the Weasler six, Willard remembered Tony paying about \$50,000 for the original machines he moved from Pick Industries to his new business. He also recalled the compromised conditions in the original rented building.

“When we first started out in the Kewaskum building, parts of the surrounding forest were being removed,” Willard said. “Like many manufacturing buildings, the loading dock was in the back and in the spring time the path from the highway to the road was so bad from the meltdown and deforesting that the route was all mud. So it was a real mess. Tony had a makeshift office in that original plant and when the semis full of steel arrived they couldn’t get back to the loading dock because it was awfully muddy so they had to pull up to the front office door—which was Tony’s. There, we had to make a kind of assembly line in order to unload the skids one by one and carry the steel one bar at a time through Tony’s office door, bringing it out to the plant so it could either be machined or stored in inventory.”

The heating system consisted of a pot-bellied stove, and when it was cold and windy outside workers rubbed their hands together near the stove in order to get some fleeting relief from the cold steel they carried throughout their day. They also warmed themselves up with an occasional beer after work at the Mermack Bar, a cream city brick building with a large front window located on Main Street in West Bend. Workers cashed their checks at the local bars, and the more successful Weasler became the more checks were cashed at Mermack.

Tony's Golden Era

In 1953, Tony was gaining more customers and looking to expand. As a student, he frequently passed some farm land between Kewaskum and West Bend, and as a business owner it was part of his daily commute to the plant. He liked that the land was rural and located between a village and a city. Tony also favored this particular piece of property because it was near a rail system, and he could use this as a backup means of transportation to ship his product or receive raw material in case he ever needed to. Since he desired a bigger building, and just three miles south there were numerous farm fields that he thought he could build on, he inquired as to who owned the land on the west side of the highway and went to the house of John and Selene Bertram to ask them to sell three acres. They were reluctant at first, but after two years of convincing, they sold Tony some land with an option to buy the rest of their farmland west of Highway 45 (which he purchased a year later). He offered the Bertrams one thousand dollars an acre, and the going rate for an acre in the early 1950s was one hundred dollars. After everything was finalized he began building and moved his company out of the cold and drafty building to the brand new location and structure just up the road in 1955. Tony was so grateful to the Bertrams that he took them out for dinner at Christmas time every year after they sold him the three acres. After Mr. Bertram passed away, Tony wanted to continue showing his gratitude to Mrs. Bertram with a yearly Christmas dinner, but he was concerned about any scandal that such a dinner date would cause, so he always asked a family friend to accompany them.

Tony also wanted a West Bend location for his new building, since he thought it would be better for business if his company was located in a bigger city. Thus, he went to the West Bend Post Office and obtained a post office box.

Willard and the others were working many more hours than a normal work week those initial days after the move from Kewaskum to West Bend. They were easily putting in fifty hours, which included Saturdays and an occasional Sunday. Also, if something in the machine shop went wrong after Willard left for the day, he sometimes received a phone call in the evening asking him to come in to straighten something out since his supervisor wanted to keep the machines running.

News spread that Weasler had a reputable business, but not only did Tony have a reputation of being a good business man in the community, his workers saw and noted his humbling behavior before he walked into the plant—which made quite an impression. Upon arriving to work each morning, getting out of his Oldsmobile and later, a black Lincoln, Tony surveyed the area and if any trash had blown on the lawn the previous night, he picked it up before entering the building. When he was in the plant he did the same thing—picking up paper, washers, bolts, or any other items that had been dropped on the floor. On the weekends, still dressed in his suit and tie (wearing the same to ball games and all other events like Connie Mack), he went through the scrap hoppers in the shop and the dumpsters outside, never fussing about getting his clothes dirty since he considered them his working clothes and he hated waste that much. Tony never told people to pick up the garbage or go through the scrap hoppers; he led by example, which motivated others to keep a clean work area.

Soon after moving to the new location, other workers from Pick Industries left on their own and followed Willard. Willard helped build the business by training the newcomers from Pick on the lathes, drill presses, milling machines, and broaches that he ran.

“The workers that needed training would watch how I was running a particular machine, then they would try it and I would watch them,” Willard recollected. “If they didn’t do it right I would show them the right way until they learned it. That took some time but that was alright.”

Since Weasler Engineering was a piece work plant in those early years, workers wanted to be at the machines as much as possible because the more they produced, the more they earned. In those days, Willard (and the other trainers) actually lost money when they were pulled away from their machines, but Willard and the others were relaxed and willing when it came to training the newer workers. Willard credited the comfortable yet professional atmosphere Tony created so others could train, learn, and succeed in his new job shop.

Willard Kaun worked at Weasler for thirty-five years, retiring in 1986. He was born in 1922 and his memories of Tony and the Weasler way are vivid.

“Tony was just a common, ordinary man,” Willard remembered. “Really down to earth and honest. He was a farm boy who became a multi-millionaire. He understood people and as far as money was concerned he never showed it. He donated one and a half million dollars to Marquette and when a lot of guys at work found out about it in the paper, because you never would have gotten that kind of news from Tony, they weren’t

very happy about it and said, ‘Why didn’t he give some of that to us instead of donating it to Marquette?’”

After retiring from Weasler, Willard worked part-time at a factory called Hydraulic Gear for thirteen years. One of the main reasons he decided to get a part-time job there was because two of the guys that also retired from Weasler went to Hydraulic Gear, and he wanted the good times to continue. Willard was seventy-five when he retired completely.

“I have very pleasant memories working for Weasler,” Willard recalled. “I felt like I was part of a family because Tony was always decent and pleasant. He valued my work and my opinion. He must have had a lot of stress being in the position he was in yet conversing with him was relaxing. Back then, people were more relaxed. Working for him in those early years and being a part of the first business, the move, and then the growth was a good thing for me. I believe he brought out the best in others.”

Tony often asked Willard and other employees, including his own family members, how things could be done more efficiently. He valued his employees’ opinions and ideas, and many of his family members worked at Weasler Engineering including his wife, Lucille, a farm girl from the town of Farmington. Lucille washed the shop rags, helped plan the lavish Christmas parties at the Fish Shanty (later the Smith Brothers) in Port Washington, and coordinated the gift giving (from tea towels to slow cookers) for employees and their spouses. She treated employees like they were her own family.

Since Tony believed in working hard and giving everyone a chance to pitch in, his young family, his parents, and his sister were no exceptions. His son Paul started helping

in and around his father's shop as a seven-year-old in the 1950s: "I cleaned the toilet and the wash basin for the employees in the shop. I helped move steel bars as best as a little kid does. There was always an adult with me but I did a lot of dirty work...I swept the floors," Paul recalled.

Tony's mother, Hanna, a gracious yet tenacious lady (who had a reputation for being able to start stubborn old thrashing machines used in the farm fields powered by steam engines to separate the grain from the stalks and husks) also started working for Tony in the early 1950s. A little over five feet, Hanna wore plaid house dresses with big front pockets, black shoes with laces and half inch heels, and pinned her silvery gray hair back in a small, tight bun. She made wooden boxes for storing parts while straightening the used nails she needed in order to reuse them. Hanna also organized, cleaned, and stocked the company café, assembled the cross and bearing kits, hauled products in her car to Milwaukee in order for them to be heat treated, and broke up skids to warm her home. She drove an old green Studebaker and stacked the back seat and the opened trunk with skids. According to several workers, Hanna was one of those individuals who never stopped. One day, while driving to Weasler, eighty-something-year-old Hanna was stopped for speeding. The officer who stopped her asked her why she was going so fast and she replied, "I have to get to work."

After her Studebaker wore out, she needed another car to get to work so Tony went to the first Russ Darrow dealership on the south end of West Bend and bought his eighty-six year old mother a Plymouth Valiant so she could make the daily twenty mile roundtrip drive. After the transaction, the dealer was said to have remarked that it wasn't

too often he saw a sixty-six year old man buy a car for his eighty-six year old mother in order for her to drive to work every day.

When Hanna could no longer drive, a co-worker picked her up on Mondays and brought her home on Fridays, and she continued to work her normal eight hour shift but stayed with her daughter in West Bend during the work week so she wouldn't have to make the daily commute to Campbellsport. Besides working on the shop floor, Hanna's work routine consisted of visiting Tony in his office where she could rest and enjoy a family member's company. Hanna was known as "Grandma" around the plant, which was also what her name tag revealed. She is described by many as funny, sharp, and earthy. Hanna worked at Weasler Engineering until she was ninety-three years old.

Tony's sister, Elizabeth, nicknamed "Pep" for her lively step and can-do attitude, worked at the company as well, doing odd jobs all over the shop. The shop workers would comment about Pep, "'Look it, a multi-millionaire working on the factory floor.'"

After starting his business, moving it three miles south on land that he purchased to a building he built, hiring more people, and finding time to work on his inventions, in October of 1957 Tony was granted his first patent for a phase-controlled telescoping member. Always thinking of the farmer, this invention, which connected four Mickey Mouse yokes to a long tubular driveshaft, makes it easier for farmers to turn their loads while using full horse power.

Tony continued to recruit, too, building his driveline empire one person at a time.

About a half mile south of Weasler sits a farm that was built by the Knoeck family in 1854. Gerhard Knoeck came over from Germany, purchased three-hundred and twenty acres, and worked the farm until 1902. When his children married, each was given an eighty-eight acre farm, and Gerry, great grandson of Gerhard, met Tony while working the hundred year old dairy farm one fall morning in 1958. At that time the original Highway 45 went past Gerry's farm, and the road by the Friendly Farmer Tavern (now Shlufty's Inn) had a very sharp curve causing lots of accidents, so the Department of Transportation decided to build the highway with a more negotiable curve. Directly across from Gerry's barn, the road crew put on the finishing touches and laid a little bit of gravel to cover the road before the final paving. As nineteen-year-old Gerry worked with the cows in the barn that rainy autumn morning, in walked a man in a business suit and tie. It was Tony. His car was stuck in the wet gravel, so he asked Gerry to pull him out. After he did, they chatted for a long time, and Tony asked Gerry if he would be interested in working for him. With the recession, lack of jobs, farms downsizing, the recent loss of fields due to the DOT's efforts, and Gerry's father taking a job at Modern Equipment in Newburg, Gerry was very interested. A few days after that encounter, Gerry went over to get some feed from the silo at the Bertram farm across the road from Weasler Engineering that he had been renting. Tony saw Gerry from his office window and sent his righthand man, Carl Steinert, over to see if Gerry wanted to start work at Weasler that evening. Gerry never filled out an application or any other paper work and reported for work that same evening and then began the day shift the very next day.

Gerry remembered Tony as a motivator: “Here I am a nineteen-year old kid and he would come out to the shop floor after I started and ask me how I could help him run the plant more efficiently. He was such a humble guy...I call it servant leadership. You know you hear that term and you might think of something biblical.”

Gerry worked on the shop floor as a material handler, but the Weasler family always showed him just how much he meant to them and their business. They took him to different conventions and invited him to lunch at the West Bend Country Club while “introducing him as someone really important.”

“But I really wasn’t important,” Gerry said. “I was just working out in the plant.”

At one lunch, Gerry met Bernie Nielson, president of the Gehl Company (producers of agricultural products) at the time.

“Paul introduced me to Bernie as someone really really important,” Gerry said, “so a little later I was visiting with Bernie one-on-one and he asked me what I did at Weasler. I told him I was a material handler out there and he said, ‘Yeah, and I’m the Fuller brush man.’ That’s the way the whole family was.”

Another event Tony invited Gerry to was with family friend Father Fitzgerald from Marquette, who Gerry knew a little. Gerry thought it was just going to be a casual lunch so he wore comfortable clothes. To his surprise, it ended up being a who’s who gathering with all kinds of prominent people in business and industry from the Milwaukee area.

“I felt like an idiot because here I thought we were just going to have a casual lunch so I dressed pretty casually,” Gerry remembered. “They did not make me feel at all like an idiot, and I ended up having a nice time.”

Business luncheons and events were common outside of Weasler but inside the plant, Tony didn't forget his workers at holiday or anniversary time. There were gifts, food, drink, and well wishes for families, and Tony had a knack for remembering the names of his workers' family members and enjoyed celebrating with them. At one end-of-the-year party, the day before New Year's Eve, employees worked a half day and the other half they were paid to party since Tony set up cheese, crackers, sausage, chips, dip, cookies, candy and shared the alcohol he received from salesmen. Sometimes, however, a few workers had trouble getting to the time clock at the end of the day, so Tony eventually stopped bringing out the booze during these celebrations.

Because of the faith he placed in the people that worked for him, Tony sold certain products that the company had never made or didn't even know how to make when he would speak to customers regarding their product needs. One engineer was so talented and dedicated that he would work with Tony on designing a product that had been a figment of the inventor's imagination. Because of Tony's drive to please the customer along with his inventive mind, Tony had over thirty patents in three countries—the United States, Great Britain, and Canada.

Although inventor, founder, owner, and president of a thriving driveline company and keeper of all the risks involved with that, Tony was the ultimate salesman (and the

only salesman the company had at that time) who did not lack flair. He had a mahogany box with felt lining and chrome plated parts—yokes, cross and bearings, and whatever else his company made at the time. Like an early Vaudeville act, Tony took this on the road with him and explained to his customers how his company made them. He visited businesses trying to sell his products and, during these presentations, used a prop to enhance his speech and add a little pizzazz. Meeting in the customer's office, (either the president or general manager's), Tony unfolded a blue velvet cloth and carefully draped it over the potential buyer's desk--careful not to disturb any papers, books, and manuals. Treating his products as if they were precious jewels, he gently placed his parts on top of the piece of blue velvet so the customer wouldn't be distracted by anything. Tony's speech and performance were so convincing that any customers who had no intentions of trying his product before he started ended up agreeing to try it before he left.

Another trick he used in his act was the spline finder. Splines are used on drive shafts to transfer torque and revolutions, and the spline finder had two metal shafts that could be fitted together when the "teeth" were lined up correctly. Tony used to carry the spline finder around with him, performing tricks behind his back like a magician for anyone who would be interested at trade shows or at the plant. His tremendous sense of pride in his products and the mechanical world in general fascinated his customers as well as his employees.

When customers came to the plant, Tony rolled out a red carpet from the main entrance to the parking lot before their arrival; he was a natural at making customers feel welcomed. But it did not start and stop with customers. Tony didn't care if one was a

truck driver, custodian, shop employee or office worker. If you were walking with him (and one had to walk a pretty fast pace to keep up with his speedy stride), through a doorway for instance, he would make it a point to open the door for *you*. Since he looked at himself as the host, it came across as a most natural thing—to everyone. He respected and catered to people, not positions.

By 1964, Tony had been granted seven more patents since his first in 1957. His resourceful mind always dialed in, even at the barber shop where he rested a clipboard on his lap so he could take notes or write down ideas as the barber cut his hair. He suggested others do the same instead of sitting idly in the barber chair. That inventive mind was the same at home. Tony didn't need a lot of sleep, and many times he woke up at night jotting down ideas for products and patents on the notepad he kept on his nightstand.

The inventor's patents meant more products and work. The business continued to grow, and Tony invited his employees to a special dinner to celebrate that first expansion. The union expanded, too, and with Tony at the helm, there was an excellent relationship between the two since he worked at it and believed the union was just as important as the company. According to several bargaining committee members, Tony could be a real stickler when it came to contract time. However, when negotiations were settled, everybody shook hands and things were forgotten about. Hostile words that were spoken were forgotten and grudge holding was kept to a minimum. One time, the union was threatening to strike, and when Tony discovered this he wouldn't allow it. He put things

in motion, called the bargaining committee and his supervisors and said that it had to be solved immediately. So the two sides worked through the evening and into the night, settled at ten-thirty p.m. (beating the twelve midnight deadline), and union workers got a call before the deadline letting them know that they should report to work the next day since the contract was settled. Tony worked with both sides so no one would have to be on strike. Tony understood that it came down to leadership when making decisions about the union and company business, and he recognized that nobody was bigger or better than the business and declared, “A company that cannot manage itself needs a union, and then they’ll end up getting the union they deserve and if I can’t deal with it, it’s my fault.”

As Weasler Engineering became more successful, Tony was obligated to travel more. In 1966, he was arrested and charged for driving twelve miles over the speed limit “as a result of aerial clocking of traffic,” according to an Oshkosh newspaper archive. Tony, sixty-one years old at the time and averaging about thirty-five thousand miles a year, pleaded guilty and noted that the arresting officer was a perfect gentleman and a credit to the state. Since Tony had no previous traffic arrests, Judge Sitter ordered the case dismissed as a warning.

Because of the success of the business, Tony traveled more frequently out of state, as well. Like other inventors, Tony never had any real hobbies and didn’t take vacations. Once, on a business trip to Mexico, however, he went on a guided fishing tour and, with some help, caught a sail fish (sans suit and tie). Measurements were taken and Tony had a replica of it mounted and hung it in his office. But, he made sure those trips didn’t last too long since he always wanted to be accessible to the three shifts at Weasler,

where he would show up at all hours to visit with shop employees regarding their concerns.

As Tony aged, he didn't slow down according to Jacki Gruss, an Englishwoman from Liverpool, who had daily dealings with Tony while operating the switchboard at Weasler and got along well with him because "I walked as fast as he did...and he really trucked." Tony was seventy-five years old when Jacki started, and they hit it off right from the start.

"Oh, I loved him. He had a charisma, a presence, and got to where he was because he was a good leader."

Tony also had expectations. One day, when Jacki was leaving at eleven-thirty a.m. to pick up something for work, Tony came into her area to speak to her about something. He noticed that she had her coat on and glanced at his watch since lunch throughout the company wasn't until twelve p.m. so she explained why she was leaving to put him "at ease." On another occasion, Tony saw a semi leaving the dock after it had delivered the steel tubing and shafting needed for Weasler products. He noticed, however, that the flatbed of the semi wasn't exactly flat, so he asked Jacki to come with him out to the shop floor to take pictures of any steel that wasn't straight, or that had dents or dings. He was very careful and observant and wanted to make sure he was getting good quality steel for what he was paying. He also had to answer to his customers and employees because if the parts were bad he understood the whole company would suffer.

According to Jacki, “He had an interest in everybody who worked for him and made daily visits out to the factory, checking on his product and visiting with the people who made it. I not only got to know him at work but outside of work on a social basis, as well and he was a gentleman and a gentle man in both terms. I mean, we still have his picture on the factory wall.”

In addition to his daily operations at the plant, relying on his employees, developing new products and patents, Tony sat on several boards and was actively involved in local civic and religious groups and charities. His work with the Kiwanis Club and Marquette University assisted students in obtaining intellectual and financial support for student endeavors, and in 1989 he was nominated by *Inc. Magazine* for Entrepreneur of the Year. He helped and encouraged local businesses and was credited with helping other companies get their start. He went on trade missions with the governor to Japan, insisting Lucille go with him even though she thought it would be better if she stayed behind. According to the write-up for the Marquette University Distinguished Alumnus Award, Tony had a reputation of being “an innovative engineer, manufacturer, and marketer expanding his company’s product line of nationally recognized mechanical power transmission equipment while never losing sight of his initial idea—to supply the agricultural industry with a quality component manufactured with safety in mind. He maintained a clean, well-lighted facility, as well as an excellent relationship with and interest in his employees. His leadership ability is based on his own personal

involvement and dedication—a total commitment to his customers, the company he founded and the employees he refers to as the Weasler family.”

Among his “family” were engineers and designers. Tony enjoyed being in the designing and mechanical mix and would sit with the engineers while using his own office mainly for special occasions such as presenting diamond tie tacks and other gifts for anniversaries and holidays. At Easter time, Tony loved handing out hams and corsages for employees’ spouses and mothers, and at Christmas, it was turkeys and bonus checks.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Weasler obtained ten more patents, expanded the second floor offices, and when Tony advertised in the newspaper that Weasler Engineering was hiring, he put in the ad that he never had to lay off a single worker since the start of his business back in 1951.

In 1983, Paul became president, and Lucille tried to encourage Tony to go to Florida for a short time during the winter months, but he never went since he felt obligated to remain close to the business. As he aged, his children convinced him that he shouldn’t drive anymore, so his son picked him up and brought him to the plant.

In 1989, Lucille passed away. Near the docks one day, Tony was spotted wiping away tears with a white handkerchief as he was thinking about his wife. Workers from nearby departments gathered to console him.

As Tony reached his late eighties, he didn’t come into the plant as much on the weekends. One Saturday that Gerry had to work, Tony called him at the plant and

wanted him to come over to his house in West Bend. Gerry was unable to leave the plant since they had a special project going on and had to make deliveries.

“Tony was kind of upset and borderline jealous,” Gerry remembered, “since he felt like he was missing out and wasn’t invited to the party. Yeah, he was a bit envious that I was at the plant and he couldn’t be. That’s how much he loved that company; that’s how much he wanted to be a part of it.”

It was about succeeding with Tony, not about how much money he made; he was in competition with his own business.

Tony’s reputation for creating a family-friendly environment and his philosophy of a happier worker is a more productive worker was his winning combination in the workplace.

Among the stories about Tony workers have shared over the years, there are three consistent themes: people liked to imitate Tony’s work ethic, his employees did not want to let him down, and the love and respect he gave to others was returned to him in many ways.

As Tony aged he realized that he could no longer run the company in his usual non-stop way, so in August 1995 he sold the company to Code Hennessy & Simmons (CHS) of Chicago. With grease, coolant, dirt, and metal chips clinging to his suit and tie, Tony walked out of Weasler Engineering for the last time at the age of ninety.

With Tony living at home alone, his children saw to it that he had caregivers helping him in his old age. A nurse of Tony recalls that Tony was actually the caregiver

in his later years, clearing the table, pouring the coffee, and doing whatever else he could do to help his caregivers.

Whether at his shop or as a ninety-something year old in his home, he was always hosting.

Upon receiving the Distinguished Alumnus Award at Marquette in 1991, this farmer, inventor, engineer, owner, founder, president, chairman of the board, salesman, marketer, husband, father, and grandfather closed his testimonial with the following remark,

“I never expected that something as great as this would ever happen to me.”

Tony Valentine Weasler passed away on February 18, 2000 at his home in West Bend. He was 94.

After Tony's death, members of the United Paperworkers International Union approached Tony's family, who were no longer working at the company, and asked them for permission to create a scholarship in Tony's name. The family agreed, and in 2001, the Anthony V. Weasler scholarship was created for children of employees who pursue higher learning. The fund has given away dozens of scholarships and thousands of dollars. The union also hung a picture of Tony on the front wall of the shop floor along with a brief history of his life. The plaque is enclosed in a glass case and the backdrop is blue velvet. When workers walk past Tony's picture, they often still wish he worked at the company.

Joe L. never knew Tony but recalled stories he heard from others. Farmer Joe and Dick remembered Tony dodging cords, coolant, grease, and chips to have conversations

with his workers, and they wondered if the leaders of Actuant would be willing to do the same.

Chapter III

Who Was Actuant, Anyway?

On the June morning in 2011 that Farmer Joe., Joe L., and Dick started going about their usual business, news quickly spread that Actuant had purchased Weasler Engineering for \$155 million in cash. Throughout the plant, workers wondered how things would change for the company that Tony Weasler founded back in 1951: Would the plant keep its mom and pop feel? Would Actuant be bringing in a lot of new people and getting rid of a lot of the established workers? Would they lay off as many workers as possible and squeeze as much work as they can out of those remaining? Would they bust the union?

Dick had been pondering the changes the acquisition would bring to the marketing side of the company and was looking forward to the ownership change with a positive attitude. Since Dick was an executive, he already had a little exposure to the new organization and some of the people that would be directly involved with Weasler before the official purchase day. He believed that the change in ownership would provide a more stable long-term environment for Weasler and its employees. He also thought that the changes would be minimal because Weasler's market position was strong, the Weasler product line and markets were mostly new to Actuant, and Weasler was more manufacturing intensive than any other Actuant company.

Farmer Joe and Joe L., like others, were curious if they would be alright or if work would be split up and shipped over to China. Many in Washington County had weathered the closings, downsizings, and layoffs of other West Bend/Kewaskum manufacturing companies. According to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, there were over ten thousand extended mass layoff initial claimants for

unemployment insurance between 1995 and 2010 in Washington County. Many came from Regal Ware (maker of fine cookware), Gehl Company (agricultural and construction equipment manufacturer), Amity (producer of fine leather goods), and the West Bend Company to work at Weasler because of the changes in the manufacturing climate.

Although some of the shuttered companies' buildings at these companies still stood, most were empty or close to empty, and quiet. Cubicles sat vacant and shop floor product lines disappeared since production was moved overseas, moved to another state, or discontinued. And the parking lots that were previously described as impossible to find a space in now looked like empty school playgrounds after recess. Talk at the local restaurants, banks, the YMCA, groceries stores, and post offices was that eventually buildings would fall or be gutted for apartment buildings. With all of this production declining, there was an eeriness in Washington County, and people were scared.

Thus, people reacted to the news of Weasler being sold to Actuant with apprehension, wanting more information. Was Weasler going to be another? Why would Actuant purchase Weasler? Was it to gain rights to the driveline business, the Weasler trademark, and find others elsewhere to build the products? Or, would Actuant build its workforce, invest more in research and development of new designs, new engineering, new patents for products, and give workers the tools to support their success like Tony did?

As employees took their morning break, they discussed the articles that were written about the official acquisition. Employees noted that *The Wall Street Journal*

reported that higher rates for agricultural products were permitting farmers to spend more on agricultural equipment so they thought that that was one of the reasons for Actuant's interest in Weasler. Farmer Joe relayed that in the *Daily News*, Washington County's circadian newspaper, the front page headline reported that "a billion dollar international company" acquired Weasler Engineering. The piece went onto explain that since Actuant wanted to gain access to the agricultural equipment market, it purchased Weasler after having done extensive research on the products it manufactures and noted its success in the market of those products in North America. Acknowledging Weasler's leading presence, Actuant desired to take Weasler's success much further globally, looking to expand their existence in South America, since demographic developments had driven up food supplies there. Others sitting at the cafeteria tables, donated to Weasler from an area elementary school years ago, chimed in that the *Daily News* article also mentioned that the leaders of Actuant anticipated progression in the agricultural market for many years to come.

"People always gotta eat so I guess they want to rely on Weasler to help with that," Farmer Joe remarked as he chugged milk from a single size carton.

More chatter about the articles in the papers followed.

"Hey, what do they mean by Actuant's Engineered Solutions business?" a young worker asked as he stuffed a doughnut in his mouth.

"Well, in the article it said something about how this part of the Actuant business had a motion controls part which provided for vehicle manufacturers besides other markets," another piped up as he wiped the crumbs from his mouth.

More talk in the break room about the *West Bend Daily* article suggested that Weasler would be a nice fit for Actuant, which was based in nearby Menomonee Falls, and that Weasler's present headquarters and manufacturing facility in West Bend would not be altered by the sale.

"It all sounds good, but who knows for sure. I guess we'll have to wait and see," another suggested as he left the break room and headed back to his work station.

"Let me see that article when you're finished with it. I want to see who Actuant is, anyway," remarked a muscular machinist as he tossed his wrappers in the garbage and descended the steps.

Weasler Engineering was no stranger to being bought and sold. Previously, investment firms had been its buyers, and since the company had its most profitable year in 2010, its present owner since 2005, American Securities Capital Partners (ASCP) of New York, was looking to sell this driveline company.

"The best time to sell anything is when you're making a huge profit—that's when you get most of the looks and a better price," noted a seasoned accountant.

The employees at Weasler had grown accustomed to the type of ownership under ASCP and previous owners after Tony. For instance, Code Hennessy & Simmons (CHS), Industrial Growth Partners (IGP), and finally ASCP were located in states other than Wisconsin, so their interest was remote and they left the day-to-day operations to the established and present Weasler management team. Also, they were more concerned

about how Weasler profited than finding ways to help increase their market. In other words, since Weasler always operated at a profit, the company was left alone to run itself.

But when Jim Hawkins, the company president handpicked by Tony, made the announcement, back in May, that Actuant had purchased Weasler, no one knew what kind of company it was. Workers began finding out little by little in the days, weeks, and months that followed.

Upon Actuant's acquisition, workers began to see who Actuant really was and noticed that things quickly took off in the first three months. The first cosmetic change to Tony's building began at the front of the shop floor. The old greasy and chewed-up cork boards that held company policies and notices were replaced by a freshly painted wall with thin strips of cork outlined in the Weasler company color—cobalt blue. On the north side of the new wall, plastic cases were mounted to house future colorful graphs and notifications so workers could keep updated on cell production, company business activities, and safety information. Next, and pretty impressive to workers, an electrician installed “show lights” to showcase the newly constructed wall and show off the new plastic cases that housed the colorful updates.

“Whoa,” exclaimed one worker, “I’m impressed already. It reminds me of a high school trophy case. I wonder what else they’re going to do?”

The extreme makeover quickly continued to the lunchroom on the second floor, where the dilapidated cheap wooden cupboards and laminated countertops were removed and replaced by slick gray ones with clean lines, a new sink, and faucets on the opposite wall. Upper cupboards were added for a more finished look and paper plates, plastic

ware, and napkins were now stored in a more ergonomic, clean, and friendly fashion. The recycled and cumbersome lunch tables with attached faded pastel backless seats that sat low to the floor and would make any chiropractor wince, were removed from the premises and replaced with round, gray futuristic-looking tables that snugly seated four with matching chairs. Additional chairs were ordered for future town hall meetings that the president would give and were easily stacked when not in use. The big oxy table used for meetings in the other half of the lunchroom, when workers were not on break, was replaced by two easy-to-move ones. A whiteboard that covered the whole wall was mounted on the south wall, and a podium, telephone, new projector, new sound system, and new automatic screen were added to turn this once worn and tired lunchroom into an upbeat gathering place for meals and activity.

And the ceiling! For years, employees were not interested in making the climb to the second floor lunch room only to eat under the ratty, asbestos-plagued ceiling and exposed piping that had been staples of the company dining area. The asbestos was removed, piping was covered, new, softer lighting was installed, and a fresh paneled ceiling now replaced the dingy, tan, tattered one.

“Hey, this is pretty nice,” an operator was overheard saying as he peeked his head through the freshly painted swinging door. “I think I might start eating my lunch up here. Maybe they’re trying to keep us here like they do at the casinos in Vegas. I hope slot machines and Elvis impersonators are in our future,” he added with a chuckle.

Others joined him and soon three- and four-handed games of Sheephead were turning up all over, in between microwaved meals and leftover lunches in the newly

renovated lunch room. Workers saw it as an inviting space, and more began using it on a daily basis—leaving their machine areas for a little reprieve during intermission.

“Seems good,” was a shared comment running throughout Weasler as more and more cosmetic changes took place.

Additional white boards went up on the shop floor to record cell progress, safety issues, and general ideas, and the front cell, where small clamps were made, would become the show case area for best practices of organization, safety, and standardization since it was the first cell anybody saw coming from the office or second floor exits. Workers in that area learned that Actuant wanted to have a prototype cell so other cells throughout the company could gather best practices in set-up times, cycle times, organization and safety issues.

Cosmetic transformations were not the only things workers were noticing in the fifty-six year old company. In addition to facelifts, they were noticing a couple new faces.

“He’s from Actuant,” a veteran machinist remarked, “and, I think he’s a spy,” he relayed on a serious note.

That “spy” turned out to be Dave Buck, Actuant’s Continuous Improvement Leader whose main focus was to help workers be successful while doing their daily work. Not your ordinary spy, Dave was the kind of leader who walked into your workspace, introduced himself, and got to know you before coming up with a plan *with you* to help improve your work. Married for thirty-nine years, this father of two and grandfather of one earned a degree in mechanical engineering from Purdue and a master of business

administration from Marquette. Dave had worked at Actuant for six years before applying for this newly created Weasler position.

Born in small-town Lawrenceburg, Indiana, Dave was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, weekend ski patroller making a big presence during the acquisition. When Actuant acquires another business, a process is put in place to help both Actuant and the business they are acquiring learn about each other. In addition to his role as Continuous Improvement Leader, Dave had studied the Weasler products, markets, culture, and acronyms so he could better understand this particular driveline business. He also helped to elucidate the Actuant culture and the implementation process Actuant would be bringing to Weasler. This consisted of the following: the supply chain procedure, the email system, the process used for capital equipment requests, and Actuant's acronyms. Probably the toughest and most sensitive, however, is the integration of the financial system's move from a private company to a public. Weasler, being a private company since its existence, had to realize that from a financial perspective, the expectations were now different. There would be more open books with new faces in the financial department from corporate in Menominee Falls. For the first time in its history Weasler would be trading on the New York Stock Exchange, filing quarterly earnings and other statements with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and be required to making this information available to shareholders and the public.

Dave, like other leaders from Actuant, understood that acquiring Weasler required hard work on both sides, and since Actuant had done a number of acquisitions, they had developed a model that is well thought out and timed based on a sequence of tasks. For

instance, decisions regarding employees, health care benefits, customers, suppliers, and software licenses follow a model that is both timely and beneficial to the acquired and to Actuant. Actuant keeps financial reporting records using Excel spreadsheets that are required to be completed within the first fiscal quarter since Actuant, and now Weasler, reports to Wall Street. Dave noted that Actuant chose to officially purchase Weasler on June 2nd since it was the first day of Actuant's fourth quarter of their fiscal year, and it would be easier on the bookkeepers if they could begin accumulating data of a new acquisition at the start of a new quarter.

Although experienced at obtaining businesses to fit under its canopy of approximately six thousand employees world-wide and operations in more than thirty countries, Actuant understood that acquiring a new company can still be a tough course because of all the vicissitudes, expectations, and uncertainties that are inevitable and sometimes unpredictable. Dialogue throughout the company was that Weasler happened to be a very successful business before Actuant showed up, so someone new coming in trying to throw their weight around better know what they're doing.

Dave acted as a liaison between the two companies since he knew from experience that there would be a lot of questions and ambiguities, and this acknowledgement helped to ease the changes Weasler would be asked to endure.

"It's always nicer to be on the acquiring side (buyer) than on the seller's side. When you're acquired, you're the boss, but Actuant's expectations were that the existing management team of Weasler or any company it acquires would continue in its roles for a

long time,” Dave recognized as he took a sip from his bottle of Diet Coke, waiting in the Learning Center for a meeting to begin.

Dave’s role as Continuous Improvement Leader was to help all employees improve their work. He recognized that he had to earn the respect of Weasler employees—not expect it. He understood that he could not just barge into someone’s work area and tell them what to do. A promoter of the 5S system (Sort, Set in order, Shine, Standardize, Sustain), the name of an organizational tool that helps workplaces and workers organize their workspace to increase productivity and value, Dave helped reinforce this tool so Weasler employees could help make smarter decisions about their work. Before Dave arrived, Weasler did utilize this tool but only sporadically since the members of the team who promoted this tool had a variety of other duties that always took precedent—such as production.

Another philosophy associated with 5S recognizes that people who have a safer, cleaner, brighter, more organized work area, and are able to make decisions about their work like their jobs more and are happier. Since workers are scheduled to be at their job eight hours a day (and more with overtime), why not create a pleasant working environment where they are more comfortable and confident? The 5S tool was rediscovered by the Japanese and is included in the Kaizen (continuous improvement) practice in their Toyota factories. Toyota’s organizational success is based on the proven techniques Henry Ford used during the early twentieth century and which other manufacturing facilities such as Weasler Engineering have been attempting to implement. This continuous improvement tool has some teeth to it, too, since it does not only

emphasize the managing of physical resources—machines, parts, raw material,—it also stresses the psychology behind the worker and the symbiosis and mutually buoying practices that attempt to help every employee, from the upbeat to the downtrodden, become a member in the drive for success. So, as Henry Ford was using this philosophy to build more efficient factories, Tony Weasler made it an institution by including all of his workers in Weasler Engineering's efforts to become successful and sustainable throughout his era.

Because of so many layers--workers' low self-worth, politics, demands of the work itself, and size of companies--workers are unable to sometimes obtain what they need and want to be more productive by working safer and smarter. Since Tony understood this problem in the manufacturing world, he was readily involved with all of his workers, showing up at their workstations, and recognizing the value in assisting others in making a positive contribution to their work area and to his business. Many times employees have continuous improvement ideas that could save a company time, money, and injury but, as companies get bigger, these ideas don't even make it on the company radar since other projects or company politics obstruct the voice of the employee, and workers soon give up. Since the position of the continuous improvement representative is to assist workers in coming up with a problem-solving process so together they can come up with a plan, and was new to Weasler, workers were looking forward to better communication between the production floor and office.

Dave remarked with enthusiasm, "The continuous improvement concept isn't just supposed to pretty things up. Not at all. Our customers see this as value added. We

communicate better with employees who are directly involved with machining or assembling our product. We have less scrap, we create a cleaner work environment, thus safer, and we are more organized which helps us focus more on our customers and product so we can fill our orders more efficiently and economically. It is a definite war on waste.”

Sounds like the resurrection of an old Tony Weasler concept—digging in the scrap bin on the weekends in a suit and tie to battle scrap—only a little less glamorous.

Dave did not want to work for a company that lost money, or that did not want to grow its people and products. When he arrived at Weasler, he was very impressed with the global presence and unique solutions in the mechanical market that had been well-established. On the ground, he observed that Tony’s former business had a strong investment in technology; Weasler had ninety-three CNC machines, and some of them cost up to \$550,000. Dave saw that Weasler offered many parts for its customers’ needs, thus a customer focus and closeness, and it was this customer friendship that contributed to Weasler’s past and present success and Tony’s legacy.

Dave observed, “Everything that I see goes to China, but when I came to Weasler, Weasler had created a great brand and bond with their customers.”

On the grimy shop floor, Dave witnessed union workers paging supervisors on push-button phones scattered throughout the company asking for advice and help; supervisors speedily walking to cells to answer questions about order sheets housed in smudge-proof plastic covers. He observed material handlers on yellow forklift trucks responding to page requests to empty rusty scrap hoppers full of metal chips in big greasy

dumpsters outside the building. He watched how tired but skillful machinists measured their steel yokes with silver-colored gages to meet tolerances and push buttons on the control panel like it was a telephone. He saw how blue-suited maintenance workers with name tags sown onto their crisp shirts dove into the CNC machines despite the heat, grease, oil, and pink coolant. He saw how they dodged cords, machine pedals, and other countless tripping hazards to keep the engineering building running. He saw how they completed orders for their customers. And he liked it. Dave spotted a definite farming work ethic—workers may complain but they get the work done. What he recognized in the president and his team were the good to great principles: personal humility, professional will, worker diligence—more plow horse than show horse, and ambitiousness for the company and not for self. He observed that these principles were put into practice, and Dave wanted to be a part of that so he could contribute positively to help that growth.

In his newly created position, Dave spent only a little amount of time in his tiny office. Between Diet Cokes and trips to the vending machines, he was in daily meetings that he called so he could be with people the majority of his days to talk about his role at Weasler and the LEAD (Lean Enterprise Across Disciplines) principle—a continuous improvement process that is used worldwide and that Actuant promoted at all its companies. Like a politician working both sides of a room, he met with company and union employees in offices and cubicles, on shop lines and in work cells touting his simple message: LEAD helps businesses reduce scrap, come up with best practices and procedures, and creates a visual workplace. Weasler had been using parts of LEAD to

help their work flow and better organize their plant, but with Actuant's purchase and Dave's newly created position, they would be able to take it to another level. Wearing a black Weasler polo shirt with faded denims and armed with a clip board, Dave interacted with all levels of the organization by listening and mentoring. He possessed no authority, but his role as influencer gave him the ability to encourage change, and by using the tools of persuasion, he set out to help others understand that the elimination of the physical and mental clutter at their workstations would help simplify their methods of working. As he spoke at podiums and at employees' workstations, he talked about how to encapsulate kata—the Japanese word for form, and how Weasler would be able to grow its organization through consistency and best practices of kata. Like a door-to-door salesman who logs many miles on foot, he touched the nooks and crannies of the shop floor and offices promoting this tool. A human billboard without the need of a placard or sandwich board, donning black Doc Martin steel-toed shoes (designed for the British Postal Service for people who have to walk all day), Dave charted company real estate for the cause.

While he moved a corroded hopper, he set a blue plastic label maker that looked like a cash register on a stand to build a temporary label making station in one of the cells. Looking like a storekeeper behind a counter, he punched a few keys to make a label and shared that he has seen a lot of things that had been done poorly or wrongly in previous companies and had processes in place to help with doing them right. Dave understood with the many adjustments an acquisition brings there can be pain, and

although he had been studying and learning about Weasler before being hired, he set out to pound those hard floors and learn from the workers.

“No matter where you have interactions with people, there is a story and one of the coaching tools I have obtained in my career was to be inquisitive,” Dave said. “I understand that my role as an influencer had to be built on trust and one way to gain that was by listening and learning.”

Dave began to develop his own sense of pride when he drove down the road and was able to point out to his wife, “There’s a Weasler driveline.” He learned that that same sense of pride was felt by Weasler employees. He was beginning to understand Tony’s attitude about the farmers in the field, their work, and their safety.

“People are out there trying to make a living with our product, and we can’t let them down, or worse, hurt them, because some of the stuff we build could fly off without a guard,” Dave acknowledged.

When workers learned that Dave was hired at Weasler to help improve things and not to “spy,” there was a little less apprehension and more welcoming. Many workers thought that maybe some things that they wanted to get done for a long time would actually get done.

As Dave made the rounds in those initial three months, and Dick attended all morning meetings reviewing engineering changes and progress in the engineering conference room with engineers and designers, Farmer Joe continued to work in the spring lok cell. He had a set-up to do in the faded creamy colored, cylinder-shaped CNC machine that he was working on that entailed several steps and took about an hour to

complete. As a technician preparing an operating room, Joe carefully cleaned the steel vise jaws and all the other steel surfaces inside the machine, using an air hose to blow off excess metal chips that clung everywhere. Like a 1970s gas station attendant cleaning a windshield with a cloth and squeegee, he carefully wiped the areas using a faded mauve shop rag in case a few chips were still hiding. Then, he effortlessly loaded the needed tools and the raw steel part in the vise while setting the work fixture offsets so the machine matched with the program. He set the tool length offset for each tool by loading the first tool in the spindle and checked the coolant lines so the tools would be properly cooled. To complete the set-up, Joe pressed a couple gray buttons on the keypad that clicked like chattering teeth, which put the machine in slow rapid, single block, and lastly pressed the big green knob which started the cycle. He ran the first part on his CNC machine and checked it to make sure it met the specifications that were printed on the blueprint, sitting on the nearby metal stand, in between the calipers and gauges. It did, and so began the machining of the basic yoke which employees say looks like Mickey Mouse ears—only these “ears” are made of steel.

While Farmer Joe was fulfilling his order of forty parts, back in paint and pack Joe L. shifted in his position from assembling and greasing parts for drivelines on the big bench to the paint booth. He wiped off the grease on his hands with graffiti wipes and put on the required Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), which consisted of a white oxygen mask that covered his head, face, neck, and draped gently over his sturdy shoulders. From behind, anyone who wears the mask looks like Donald from the cartoon *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, but from the front it has a clear plastic shield resembling

the one worn on the Apollo A7L that protects the user so he can see what he's spraying. Joe attached the respirator to the power pack, checked the paint line sprayer, closed the door to the booth, and began spraying black paint on each driveline that slowly passed him. After his two hour turn in the paint booth, he removed the helmet, detached the respirator, and walked over to the conveyor belt where he pulled each part, added small red caps, and placed each in a rusty half basket that was lined with cardboard. After digs and jibes with his co-workers, discussion turned to curiosity as to what things would be like with Actuant as the new owner.

"Did you guys notice some of the changes up front? These guys move pretty fast," Joe L. remarked as he pulled parts for packing.

"Yeah, they've only owned us for a short time," added another on the paint line, "but since the announcement in May things have been happening."

Darting around the big bench towards the shelf to grab more grease zerks that could pass for little shiny earrings, a worker noted that he read in an article online that Actuant was once \$451 million in debt but had quickly paid down that debt and is apparently running at a surplus.

After that monetary update, other talk consisted of a wish list: hiring a safety coordinator, installing lifts and cranes so they wouldn't have to carry the heavier parts, putting up informational signs so delivery trucks and outside contractors would know where to go, better lighting in certain areas, more baskets to store parts, and the list went on and on.

“Hey, maybe we’ll expand. I mean, we are running out of room in this building and outgrowing our space. We got all that land over there...why not build on it? We got the land already,” said one veteran line worker. He wasn’t the only one who felt that way.

“Who knows,” another inquired. “I just hope we don’t start shipping things over to China and getting laid off. I mean, it feels like they want the best for everybody with what we’ve been seeing, but who knows?”

So, after those initial months under new ownership, Dick continued to attend numerous engineering revision meetings and worked on desk work which included reading revisions to Weasler products in his office in between dashing to airports and dining with customers. Farmer Joe persisted in ordering stock parts needed for his machine orders and paged a trucker now and then to have them delivered. Joe L. assembled and packed more drivelines to be shipped to dealers who supplied the farmers, while Dave continued to assist employees with the integration process, laying out a plan to help them improve their work area.

Would these changes lead to success and harmony in the plant or frustration and layoffs? What would Tony Weasler’s legacy become?

Chapter IV

Amid the Rusty Half Baskets

Weeks turned to months after the purchase of Tony's company, and Weasler employees began understanding who Actuant was. In the front of the shop on the high gray table that houses the Kronos time clock, old cheap wooden boxes for attendance sheets, and a lifetime supply of blank vacation slips, the union president and stewards met for their ten minute morning break. As they rested their elbows on the table in between sips of coffee, one steward said that Actuant was in the branded hydraulics business used in excavators. Removing a metal chip that was digging in his arm, he told his fellow union brothers how this business was helping to build the world's tallest observatory in Vegas.

"Road trip," one of them shouted as he walked over to his nearby mail slot.

Down the way from the union stewards, Farmer Joe and two other farmers were chatting about another Actuant company while making their choices by the vending machines. This one was out of New York and had cornered the market on seeders. Chewing on some chips, Farmer Joe showed his co-workers, by gesturing with his hands, that the flex seeder was about two feet long, light weight, and had a flexible shaft that bounced like a slinky. It was made out of hard rubber and plastic, was black like the Weasler products, and was supposed to eliminate yearly maintenance and seed overlap when planting in the fields because of the in-line electric clutch. The best part, Joe told the group, was the seed savings. As the group leaned in, he reported that a farmer could actually save \$1.44 an acre on seeds because the seeder had an electric clutch. One man

dressed in denims, a gray tee, and blue baseball cap whistled and stroked his white beard as Joe orally calculated the savings.

“I mean, if you got a twelve row planter that plants about 2500 acres, times that by \$1.44...you’re looking at \$3600 just in seed savings. Never mind the other advantages of keeping the seed contained and no maintenance,” Farmer Joe exclaimed as he rested against the soda machine.

“No brainer,” the others said in unison as they finished eating their snacks, ignoring the end-of-break buzzer.

Little by little, workers were discovering that Actuant companies built products that helped make jobs easier for those working the land and moving the earth.

On the other side of the shop wall, minutes before the start of a morning meeting in the upstairs executive conference room, company engineers, designers, and other office personnel were getting comfortable in soft leather black chairs. One attendee made his way over to the kitchenette, grabbed a bottle of water from the black dorm-sized refrigerator, joined the others, and began commenting on some of the markets under Actuant’s umbrella. Of interest were the companies that made electrical tools and supplies and customized products and services for energy related industries like Électricité de France (EDF). One designer noted, as he removed a pen from his shirt pocket and jotted something on his yellow notepad, that EDF is France’s main electricity generation and distribution company that oversees all of the country’s nuclear power facilities, and it chose one of Actuant’s energy companies to supply it with products and

services. Others sitting at the far end of the table along the window-lined wall chatted about the highly-engineered motion controls that round out the Actuant markets such as the hydraulic systems that lower the roof of a convertible or level a Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) machine used in hospitals to scan patients.

And, with world-wide production and sales locations operating in more than thirty countries, Weasler began learning just how global Actuant was and where the West Bend company would fit in.

In the front of the room, the facilitator turned on the projector and pushed a button on the textured wall to activate the automatic projector screen. As he did so, his navy blue pant leg gently brushed against the display table that exhibited chrome-plated Weasler products. Under the soft ceiling lights, clutches, gear boxes, yokes, torsional dampers and other Weasler driveline products glimmered like jewels. They were displayed on a blue velvet backdrop. And among them in the right front corner of the blue velvet cloth was the black flex seeder from the company out of New York that Farmer Joe was bragging about.

As the meeting unfolded, attendees learned that Weasler would be uniting with a company called Elliot to form the Specialty Power Transmission (SPT) division of Actuant, since both companies influenced the power transmission market with related products. Workers were informed that some in their department would be asked to travel back and forth to Elliot in the future so the two companies could become better acquainted. Employees from Elliot would be visiting Weasler, as well.

“Oh, so that’s why the flex seeder sits among the chrome,” remarked a designer as he and some of the others turned the high back chairs towards the display table.

“Yes, that’s why,” the facilitator answered as he turned off the projector.

The designer followed up, “Are we going to get that chrome plated, too?”

Little chuckles were heard as the meeting adjourned.

Back on the shop floor, Farmer Joe measured the hub of a yoke with his calipers. As he took the tool off his machine he observed, “Ya know, when Tony had the company, he was all over the Midwest selling stuff. And then his son, Paul, got us in the European markets and took us to a whole new level but Actuant...they’re really all over. I thought Weasler was huge, you know, with its corporate headquarters right here in West Bend, but Actuant, whoa, I mean, they’re out there.”

Actuant’s leaders wanted Weasler to be out there, too, since they expressed to Weasler, shortly after the acquisition, that they wanted to help the company to double its profits in five years. But at what cost, workers wondered?

“We just had a record year and now we’re supposed to produce more. That should be interesting,” expressed a union worker.

This was the general consensus throughout the company.

Since Actuant wanted Weasler to double its profits in five years, Actuant not only looked to Weasler’s current workforce to lead the way but recommended Weasler hire others to help.

Back in the west end of the plant, as Joe L. finished his two-hour turn in the paint booth, he disengaged the oxygen helmet, grabbed the bottle of orange soda that had been sitting on the metal blue stand before he started, and began moving the rusty half baskets—the portable, heavy, square, metal baskets cut in half from their original size. Controlled by foot breaks, they save workers time, space, and injuries and are part of the shop floor real estate. Repositioning them in order to free up some room on the slow-moving parts line, he listened to the chatter about how the paint and pack's work might increase under Actuant. As hammers were swinging and banging on the big bench, there was talk about how Weasler was thinking of pursuing a third shift paint line.

In addition to the facelifts to the fifty-eight-year-old factory walls and lunch room, workers began noticing more human resources. Another major renovation that occurred shortly after the purchase, and cost over forty thousand dollars, was to one of the conference rooms. Contractors and the maintenance crew converted part of the second floor area into the newly formed HR department since prior to Actuant, Weasler did not have an HR division. Under Tony, HR duties were divided among several employees who worked in different departments. With the creation of HR, two from the payroll department moved into HR, and two new positions were created. Also, other new faces in both the office and on the shop floor began appearing and ideas for systems improvement (like the supply chain) began taking shape in Tony's company as well.

Among the remodeling and additional faces, employees were learning from guided meetings, the company website, and company literature that Actuant heavily

avored companies that met three markets: industrial, energy, and engineered solutions. Industrial included companies that assisted in bridge work; oil, gas, wind, and nuclear power companies signified the energy market; and in the engineered solutions market, the hydraulics that are used to safely lift a truck cab rounded out Actuant's interests.

Bill Blackmore, a twelve year veteran of Actuant and Executive Vice President of the Engineering Solutions division, was instrumental in transitioning Weasler. A Philadelphia native, Bill moved to Brookfield, Wisconsin after his father was transferred to the area, attended schools in Brookfield, and later, studied at the University of Wisconsin—Madison.

Bill set to studying Weasler and constructed a new business model for the West Bend company. This lean, 6' 2" executive pitched to his supervisor, Actuant's chairman and CEO, Bob Arzbaecher, that he thought Weasler could build a stronger presence in the agricultural industry and that that industry had great growth prospects. When Actuant acquired the Weasler business, Bob initiated a round table with Bill and his direct reports. At a white square table in Actuant's headquarters, fifteen miles away from Weasler, the CEO encouraged Bill's subordinates to step up and "let Bill go do this" since he, along with others, needed to set up Weasler for success. In their dark polo shirts and khakis, summer blouses and skirts, they nodded in agreement and whispered to each other how close in miles the new acquisition would be to them.

Oftentimes, within a global company, crucial conversations break down because of the vastness or busyness of being global, the overuse of email, or, because of fear.

One of Actuant's goals, however, was having effective communication with those who needed to be involved in the transition so they could see the magnitude of the company and how Bill's involvement was crucial for Weasler to be smoothly incorporated into Actuant. Developing successful workplace relationships and patterns of trust were Actuant's core principles. This jived with Tony's old management playbook: meeting them where they're at physically, mentally, and emotionally by visiting his workers in their offices and at their machines and workstations with pencil and notebook.

Bill dove into the acquisition process. He arrived at Weasler in crisp company polos and dark cotton pants ready to tackle the acquisition process because this Weasler acquisition, he believed, was not only a great asset but could be a prototype for other Actuant businesses as well, since Actuant wanted to expand its presence in the agricultural market. As he widened his blue eyes and adjusted the pen in his pocket, Bill observed that not all big corporations like Actuant had such wide boundaries that allow someone to spend the amount of money he did to purchase Weasler--some are much narrower. Bill thought Weasler could be a pacesetter. Wouldn't Tony be proud of that?

Like Dave, Bill, too, worked with a well-developed plan to help with company transitions. As he met with workers, he understood that transitioning a business can be fearful and painful. Pounding the greasy and grimy production floors, and avoiding hazardous pinch points amid the rusty half baskets where workers store parts, he realized that it can be a very difficult thing for the newly acquired business to adapt to change. The changes workers are faced with in an acquisition are tough since they cannot always see a common vision or have a common goal because things are so new.

“But, if we let them actively participate, things get clearer,” Bill stated as he pressed the cuff of his shirt.

While at Weasler, he looked for best practices that the engineering company had in place and proposed adaptations that would help it grow. During scheduled listening sessions with Weasler executives, Dick among them, and supervisors in Weasler conference rooms, he explained that Actuant acquired Weasler for several reasons. During one session, Bill noted that one of the main reasons he thought Weasler was a good fit for Actuant was because much of the trench work of building multiple relationships with customers had already been done. And, he credited some of the staff that used to work directly for Tony, particularly Dick, for that.

Using the remote to start the PowerPoint presentation, he told the group that Weasler was aligned with a market growth trend that Actuant had identified as attractive—food production--and saw this not only as a money maker but something that had staying power. As the supervisors and executives listened to his presentation, Bill spoke about the balance of the two divisions within Weasler, the Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) and the Aftermarket (AM) businesses and noted both markets were leaders in North America. His research led him to look at the business’s financial performance, and he saw that it was strong. Another reason directly paralleled Tony and his early inventiveness for mechanical safety. Back on the family farm in the early twentieth century, Tony began looking for ways to improve farming for himself as a youngster since he was getting tired of being flipped by his horse when it and the plow separated. Now, ninety years later, Bill, an engineer turned businessman, was interested

that Weasler had established the ability to be a solutions provider and that safety for customers remained at the forefront of Weasler Engineering.

“Weasler doesn’t make commodities,” he told the small crowd, “but it tries to provide safe solutions by doing their little part in helping their customers sell their equipment...and, we saw that in Weasler.”

Heads shook up and down in the Weasler conference room like bobbles given out at Miller Park.

Bill continued the slide show after clearing his throat, mentioning that it wasn’t only what the corporation saw happening presently at the Weasler business but what the corporation saw futuristically and how it could assist the business in meeting and working up to its potential. While moving to the other side of the room and advancing to the world map slide, Bill spoke in global terms about how Actuant saw more expansion in Europe at an accelerated pace. Using the laser pointer to drive his point, he landed the red dot on Brazil since Actuant wanted to do more things there, too, and planned on giving Weasler the tools to assist in that market expansion. A photo of the front of Weasler was the next slide, and Bill said that he saw things on the machine shop floor that could be improved upon such as shop organization, safety, customer satisfaction, and quality. Bill summed up his presentation with a few bullet points listed on the last slide. As he walked near the podium, he underscored that he liked how the business was run and considered it a great acquisition for Actuant. Placing the laser pointer on the podium, Bill summarized the second bullet point on the slide—recognizing that Weasler had a great brand and foundation and Actuant, with Weasler’s help, wanted to grow a new

division—the Specialty Power Transmission (SPT) along with another Actuant business that was located in New York. And, finally, walking closer to the group, he concluded that too often when a company as big as Actuant purchases a small company such as Weasler, “heads roll” and workers are forced out of their positions because the buyer brings in its “own people.” Bill reassured the group during the listening session, however, that the talented people already at Weasler should stay because they know the Weasler business and would be much more effective for the business and with their co-workers. As he shifted his weight on his feet, he also acknowledged that Weasler was a very successful company without Actuant’s help. That is one of the reasons Actuant purchased it, and he wanted to insure that that success continued with the present workforce but on a much grander scale. Weasler would have to bring in more talent if it were to meet the ambitious objective of increasing sales in a short amount of time.

Walking closer to the group, he concluded his presentation by conveying to them that it was his job to obtain other businesses to add to Actuant’s scope.

“Not all acquisitions have worked for Actuant in the past, but with those there are good lessons to learn there,” Bill noted with wide blue eyes and raised eyebrows to the Weasler workers before him. “Yet I thought the addition of Weasler to the corporation was a good fit.”

As employees got up to leave the meeting, a few stretched, some picked up their chair and returned it to what was left of a stacked pile against the wall, and Dick, with a couple of others, approached Bill and asked a few questions.

The mood in the room was a bit curious but more settled than before the meeting.

Besides leading listening sessions, making his presence known throughout all of Weasler, and focusing on finding companies that fit the different sectors of Actuant, Bill also engaged in building the talent around him.

“I am motivated by a competitive market. But what also drives me is that I work with people for a lot of years and I want to see those people be successful. I mean, I have a responsibility for twenty-two hundred employees, and I take that reasonably seriously,” Bill declared as he sat at a little round table in his office straightening some paper shortly after one of his Weasler listening sessions. “When we have a bad year at a business it’s usually not because the business was run poorly but because the markets got soft and when that happens we have to make some difficult decisions.”

Those difficult decisions include wage freezes, shutdowns, and employee reduction.

“I recognize the sacrifices our employees make. At the same time we’re trying very diligently to execute our enrollment initiative by hiring more skilled workers so we can continue to build this business and provide meaningful employment for our workers and I take that very seriously—whether it’s the Weasler team or anybody. I do want our people to do well and be successful. We are here for our employees, customers, and shareholders and if we don’t deliver for those three entities somebody else will.”

According to a 2012 Wisconsin Department of Revenue report, the manufacturing industry in the Badger State is on the rise and is considered a national leader, ranking second in the country with one of six workers—more than 450,000 people—employed in the manufacturing industry. This trade is advancing because of the engineering and

production of machines that are complex and require certain skill sets, thus offering more technological employment opportunities. The Wisconsin Department of Revenue forecasts that manufacturing employment will increase two to three percent annually through 2016, offering thousands of well-paying jobs and more technological employment opportunities for skilled workers. Employees were about to see just how much this increase would affect Weasler Engineering.

As Bill continued helping Weasler after the acquisition, he visited the noisy shop floor amid the ninety-three CNC machines and countless others and concentrated on the multi-task cell which housed six of the most expensive CNC machines. Averaging about \$500,000 per machine, the multi-task cell was referred to as the million dollar cell by shop and office employees, not only because the machines were high-tech and expensive but also because their operators' salaries were highest among the union workers on the shop floor. Situated at the front of the shop, these machines dwarfed everyone and everything around them and looked like something taken from the set of a science fiction movie. Known as the Cadillacs of automation, the CNCs measure anywhere from 8'-12' tall, with a wider girth. They have turning centers known as lathes that skilled workers program and operate to help produce the Weasler drivelines. After the operators program the machine on the colorful numeric key pad that is attached to it, the steel piece inside goes through a series of operations in one machine. Thus, the machines are called multi-task since the operator is able to incorporate several cutting procedures such as turning, drilling, deep-hole boring, milling, and tapping on a single machine instead of having

these operations cut by multiple machines. To the non-machinist eye, the machines look like an oversize deep freezer--the kind you fill after a successful deer hunting season. They have glass doors, and upon looking through those doors, one can see the hunk of metal hanging on for dear life by dual chucks and spindly arms that dizzily rotate it as it is being sliced, diced, chopped, dropped, and turned like an onion in a Nicer Dicer Plus Handy Chopper. Since machines' motor mouths are controlled by countless keys and knobs that mill, bore, slot, and saw the steel part, there's much gurgling and spraying of coolant to aid in this high-precision and highly technical process.

Bill, like others from Actuant who would later receive a thorough shop tour, was speechless upon first seeing the CNC machines. As the mechanical engineer in charge of the multi-task cell explained the highly sophisticated process with pictures and notes on a poster-sized notepad that stood on a tripod, Bill and others new to Weasler stood around the mechanical engineer with quizzical looks like high school juniors in a chemistry class.

Since the machines in the multi-task cell are at the forefront of industry, Bill asked a team of Weasler workers and operators to concentrate on making that cell more efficient and organized. As employees were finding out, Actuant emphasized continuous improvement and promoted a culture where employees sought ways to get better at their job.

Bill explained, "When we have a problem, we're not trying to point fingers. We want to identify the root of it and come up with solutions."

Sounds like a page out of Tony Weasler's notebook—always trying to improve on something and asking others how they can help. Tony's approach was simple—he met people where they were at while simultaneously uniting both office and shop workers. He was willing to teach his employees and learn from them, and workers questioned if Actuant would be able to do the same.

Weasler employees discovered that Actuant looked to its people to embrace continuous improvement by coming up with ideas, and if that meant getting dirty to help each other succeed, then that was what was expected. Actuant also looked to its workers to become coaches, facilitators, and/or mentors besides doers when the opportunity presented itself. Not everyone was on board. Sometimes workers felt that the less they knew the better, since then they were not asked to do more. One worker explained that although he was fully capable of learning more in his department, he would rather not take on that responsibility since then he would be expected to do more. It was Actuant's hope, however, that this worker and others would join in the message of continuous improvement.

To drive this continuous improvement philosophy, workers were informed via email and by their floor supervisor that they were to attend LEAN (Lean Enterprise Across Disciplines) training in the upstairs conference room. In alphabetical order and in groups of thirty, shop and office employees turned off their machines and logged out of their computers; they left the production floor and their cubicles to listen to a working philosophy that Actuant was hoping to implement. They climbed the steps to the second floor, and the first workers that arrived filled up the back row. Dave welcomed them

with smiles and candy. As more filed in and chairs began filling up, Dave began the training.

Supported by Bill, Dave conducted these meetings where each worker was asked to become more involved in their work and learn new skills. As a few workers leaned back in their chairs and others took notes, they listened to more of the Actuant message: if workers were disgruntled, Actuant asked that both shop and office employees come up with ways to improve tasks but remain patient and positive because too often there are multiple channels to go through in order to see results. Sometimes tasks take months or even years because of lack of resources, lack of buy in, multiple layers, too much company politics, or something else. As employees read through the corporate's glossy and colorful literature, calendars, and continuous improvement (LEAN) initiative, Actuant proposed a challenge to its new employees: leave a place just as good as or better than you found it after you leave it. In other words, consider the space and the people you work with. By doing that, work could be a more rewarding and pleasant experience for all. As the meeting continued and Dave gave Weasler examples of the Actuant philosophy and employee engagement, the faint sound of a candy wrapper could be heard among a cough or two.

Using the remote to advance the LEAN PowerPoint slides, Dave relayed a message that was quite simple and had to do with employee morale: when using a conference room, employees could help by putting things back where they were found and if somebody forgot to erase the board or clean off a table, do it for them. Gently moving the varnished podium to the side, he added that work on the production floor

could benefit from this *modus operandi* as well by taking ten minutes to wipe down machines, sweep areas, and putting the tooling back in place before the next shift comes in for relief.

“They’ll be glad you did, and it will make their shift a bit smoother,” Dave coached.

Moving closer to his audience with his Doc Martins scuffing slightly on the terrazzo floor as he did so, he imparted that Actuant’s customers find value in a clean, well-lit, and organized shop since customers understand that if workers’ surroundings have structure, and are bright, and clean, there will be less waste of product and time—two things customers will not pay for.

While empathizing that sometimes it’s difficult reading gauges and blueprints because of the poor shop lighting, some seated in the audience again shook their heads in agreement. They understood; those high ceiling lights caked with twenty year old grease and grime challenged their work.

Making lots of eye contact with attendees, Dave worked the room like a door-to-door salesman peddling product. He asked workers to look holistically at processes in order to make them better, more efficient, while being able to look at wasteful practices--which would cut out what the customer doesn’t need.

“This is much more than shop floor productivity improvement,” he said with conviction, his blue eyes as wide as saucers. “It’s a win-win philosophy for all involved.”

And another page out of Tony’s notebook.

In a 1991 Engineering Distinguished Alumnus Award write-up from Marquette University about Tony and the history of his company, nothing stands out more clearly than his reputation for quality—not just in the product his company sold but in the “clean, well-lighted facility, as well as the excellent relationship with and interest in his employees.” Tony touched all by weaving in between their machines, dodging rusty half baskets where they temporarily stored parts for pickup, and avoiding countless power cords and hoppers in order to build employee relationships and improve productivity.

Was it now Actuant who wanted Tony’s principles put into practice?

After the meeting, a United Steel Workers union member said, “Well, if we have to be here working eight to twelve hour days, we might as well learn what we can to do our best and be happy about it.”

After sitting for an hour through LEAN training and the continuous improvement message, they were beginning to understand what Actuant had in store for them. Dave, representing Actuant and now a Weasler employee (and no longer considered a spy), took to the floor again where he led a group of operators in the small clamp cell. He obtained permission from their supervisors to hold an event—that is, to schedule round table time with the three shift operators to discuss how they could make their cell better and come up with a plan.

From seven to eleven a.m. on a Monday morning in the newly remodeled café, they met and deliberated on how to execute a plan of working smarter, not harder. On the dry erase wall board, workers made lists, citing pros, cons, obstacles, best practices,

and anything else they could think of to improve their cells not just cosmetically or housekeeping-wise but also their processes and standards. One tattooed machinist in particular requested better floor mats since he was on his feet in that area seven-plus hours a day.

“I sit on my breaks but we could sure use different floor mats since the ones we have now are harder than...,” his voice trailing off after his recommendation was heard. Everybody laughed.

After the laughter, he continued in a feigned childish voice, “I would definitely work better and processes would improve if the mat situation got better.” More laughter.

As the blue marker lists were filling a big section of the wall board, a few minutes later Dave passed around a lunch menu.

“You mean, we get a free lunch? Things are continuously improving already,” another ascertained as she put down her pen and looked over the menu. More chuckling from the small group followed.

At about eleven o’clock with notes in hand, Dave, along with the three small clamp operators, left the café and returned to the shop floor. They began the LEAN continuous improvement process by gathering cleaning supplies to wipe down the machines. They each took a machine and with a plastic bagful of shop cloths and full bottles of degreaser, the four battled the grease and grime. After asking the maintenance department to lock and tag the machines, two obtained tall red ladders and began crawling on the tops of the CNC monstrosities. Acrobatic in their movements, they dodged holes and uneven areas to wage war on the oil and grime. After wiping down the

front and sides on the machines, the battlers on the ground--their jeans and t-shirts covered with dirt--used long magnets that looked like homemade silver canes to gather countless metal chips that congregated between the machines and under the mats. Another in tan steel-toed, laced-up boots swept up small parts, crumbs, paper, and other items that had been accumulating between the mausoleum-looking CNCs. Dave obtained an electronic label maker that looked like a 1990 gas station cash register, punched a couple letters and commands and printed up numerous labels with naming rights to the different-sized gauges, hammers, screw drives, and needle nose pliers. After one of the operators finished the tops of the CNCs, he ripped off a piece of paper from the notebook that was chained to a work stand and scribbled a maintenance request for a guard to be assembled on a machine. After looking around the cell like a sleuth examining for clues, he picked up the short pencil, which was badly in need of sharpening, and added a tall metal stand for tools that would save time by not having to put out a search warrant every time one goes missing.

After lunch and for the next two days, the four of them worked as a team, got to know each other over company-paid lunches, and not only developed a team ethos but actually saw and liked the needed improvements. Word got around that Actuant was here to stay and so were the employees.

But the market trends were soft in fiscal year 2012-2013, and Weasler was unable to meet its bold production goals. There were company-wide wage freezes, company shutdowns over the weeks of Independence Day and Christmas, and employee layoffs.

Beginning in the fall of 2013, however, Weasler employees started working overtime, workers who were laid off were called back, and new employees were hired. They were coming in four hours before their regular shift time and working mandatory Saturdays and voluntarily on Sundays; one supervisor mentioned that he had worked thirty-five days in a row. Another stated that there was so much being shipped out of Weasler that if he stood still, he'd get boxed and shipped, too. Workers were tired, but morale was good since they realized what the alternative was. Also, the company recognized that it was outgrowing its building. Storage spaces and small cubbies continued to be converted into offices, and production was increasing at such a rapid rate that shop floor real estate was at a premium. There was talk about getting rid of the neighboring warehouse that housed raw material and turning Tony's building into a warehouse and building, at a nearby location, a bigger and brighter Weasler Engineering. There was no more mention of work leaving the building, lines shutting down, or layoffs.

Instead, Weasler was getting into markets in South America and meeting ambitious company goals, shipping at rates that it had never shipped before, and taking products further and further around the globe.

When 2014 arrived, overtime was still plentiful on the paint and pack line, and in most areas of the shop, and Joe L. was working ten hour days, with a mandatory six on Saturday and optional Sundays. He said he gets pretty tired by the end of the week, but there was talk of the company starting a third shift paint and pack line soon so the overtime wouldn't be permanent.

“Now’s the time to get it,” Joe L. explained. “Since the checks are nice, and with summer coming the shop can easily get over ninety degrees, and nobody wants to work extra when that happens.”

Farmer Joe kept busy making yokes in the spring lok cell. He didn’t have to bother working overtime during the week, since the other two operators on the other two shifts filled in for him so he could get home and tend to his cows.

Dick Preston, however, had decided to retire in March of 2013. He turned sixty-two that year, and although the new establishment attempted to keep him, he left after throwing a party, inviting familiar Weasler faces and new ones from Actuant. He said he would miss the people at Weasler but not the four a.m. start to his day.

There was a lot of inclusion in this new Weasler, with employees giving input as to how to make their jobs better and safer. There were more round tables regarding streamlining and standardizing processes, and conference rooms were booked on a daily basis with new global accents and faces. If the dialogue continued and the tools were provided to prolong the success, Weasler could offer a model for reviving American manufacturing. Wouldn’t Tony, the dirt poor farmer who worked hard to create a business he was constantly in competition with, bring out the red carpet for that?

Acknowledgments

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Notes

All information not cited below is based on personal interviews and observations from my reporting and journal.

Introduction

Page

- 6 Training Within Industry <http://www.trainingwithinindustry.net/>
Resources on this website are useful for corporate training, growth, and development.

Chapter II: Blue Velvet

- 30 I used the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*— Final Edition—Section B, “Weasler Engineered His Success,” p. 23 February 22, 2000 to report on Tony’s humble beginning.
- 31 I reconstructed the scene where Tony was pulled over his horse while plowing the field. According to his son, a close friend, and Tony’s own testimonial, this is what motivated him to invent products that better protected the farmer.
- 32 I used The Hilltop of ’28 p. 99, Tony’s 1928 yearbook to report on the clubs he was a member of in school.
- 46 I obtained a list of Tony’s patents along with the dates and whether they were active or not from an Excel spreadsheet from Weasler’s vice president of engineering. I obtained a list of products from company brochures and from www.weasler.com, the company website.
- 50 I reconstructed the scene where Tony was showcasing his products on blue velvet material to potential customers. According to former and present workers, Tony was very proud of the products his employees made and wanted his audience’s attention so he purchased blue velvet material to lay his product on in order to present them.
- 52 I found information about Tony’s speeding ticket from the *Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, “Defendant Says Arresting Officer Was Gentleman” p. 16 November 22, 1966. I used it because I think it gives insight into Tony’s depth of character and uprightness.

- 54 I found information about Tony's volunteer work with the Kiwanis Club in the *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune* dated June 6, 1937 in the article "Canadian New President of Kiwanis International." It shows how he connected with local schools and businesses that were interested in becoming Kiwanians.
- 57 I used the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*— Final Edition—Section B, "Weasler Engineered His Success" p. 23 February 22, 2000 to report on Tony's humble ending.

Chapter III: Who Was Actuant, Anyway?

- 61 The Wisconsin mass layoff statistics and county-level data for the US come from the following websites:
<http://worknet.wisconsin.gov/worknet/downloads.aspx?menuselection=da&pgm=pcml>
<http://www.bls.gov/mls//cntyicmain.htm>
 Statistics on these websites are used to report Washington County initial claimants for unemployment insurance.
- 62 I used the Weasler archives to report on what investment firms Weasler was sold to after Tony. The name of the company document is *Weasler Ink*, Volume 4, Special Anniversary Edition, October, 1997.

Chapter IV: Amid the Rusty Half Baskets

- 88 Wisconsin Revenue statistics come from the following website:
http://www.revenue.wi.gov/news/2013/20131016_01.pdf
 Statistics from this website are used to show the projected rise in the manufacturing industry in Wisconsin between 2012 and 2016. The state is projected to see an increase in higher paying jobs that require skilled labor.

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