



CHOKING ON ENRON

BY MARY HELEN GILLESPIE

Do you think George Bush was really watching a football game when that pretzel went down the wrong pipe? He was probably getting the latest Enron debriefing when he choked, fainted, and fell.

Think about it. What flashes through your mind when you hear the E-word?

- A) No way.
- B) Not here.
- C) Yes, here.
- D) All of the above.

Houston, we have a problem. The correct answer is D.

It's gone from being a business story to *the* story. But unlike Osama bin Laden, we all know Enron chairman Kenneth Lay is safe and sound in his not-so-secret cave deep in the heart of Texas.

Enrongate is the white-collar version of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" There are those who can't start or end the day without the latest on the flame-n-shame fall of what was once the seventh-largest company in America.

We're the same ones who walked away from the O.J. trial, stopped reading the Starr Report at the spinach-dip reference, and refuse to listen to one more Red Sox story unless it says Pedro Martinez is pitching on Opening Day at Fenway.

But now we're gawking with disbelief as each new lurid Enron detail unveils itself: Junior auditors destroy-

ing client files, not-so-subtle phone calls to Washington, gutsy letters from ethical subordinates, and senior managers just smiling each time the devil asked them to dance.

At the core of this astonishment: The apparent ease with which executive leadership abused and abandoned the trust of thousands of employees. In the process, they destroyed their own personal and professional reputations. Oh yes, they also nailed the stockholders.

How could they do this? By developing a Machiavellian culture that rewarded the quietness of incompetence, fostered indifference to change, and punished those who questioned authority. Enron managers designed an organization where only they would, in the end, succeed.

So many secrets, so little time.

The root of every successful organization is based on relationships. It's the people skills that make or break a company. It can have the best product, the snazziest campaign, but without human beings to sell and buy its wares, it will fail.

Enron had the people, but it fed them lies, mocked their loyalty, and ruptured their credibility. Legal pundits say parts of the company can still be saved to pay off creditors. Why even let this continue?

Face it, business is just a fancy buzzword for crapshoot. More companies fail than succeed. Just try

counting on one hand the number of people who you know are looking for work right now.

It's all about mitigating risk and managing resources. Some of us do it well, some do it better, and some go back to school for a certificate in jazz theory. But until now, it was reasonable to accept that we managers did more than just hand over a paycheck. We gave employees a collegial vision of success buoyed by team spirit. The organization nurtured a sense of self and togetherness. Yes, the bottom line is cash. But it wasn't just about the money. It was about the journey.

What Enron did was tarnish this sense of engagement for all employers and all employees, not just their own. Just listen to the fear floating around. Employees justifiably are pondering, "Are we the next Enron?" Sadly, the answers may vary.

The challenge to organizations is to regain and replenish that internal sense of unity with their teams, a task that will be very difficult in this current business environment. This takes leaders, not managers, to pull off.

As for Enron, I'd say the best is yet to come as far as the scam-o-meter goes. Just stay away from the pretzels. ■

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