

## The Chronicles of Memphissippi: Prelude to the Prologue and Preamble and a Really Fucked Up period in my Business Career

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### So It Begins

The Chronicles of Memphissippi are dedicated to those brave few, who during the Great Recession, gave their all in Memphissippi to establish the new Brownies Distribution Center. They sacrificed greatly, with excessive whining and complaining, and in a powerfully unmotivated way, 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, because they really, really needed their jobs. They were, in Tolkien terms, the Fellowship of the Totally Fucked.

And lest you think these souls were unmotivated and disheartened before they got there, I assure you they were not. They were a vibrant group of employees, who had the life systematically sucked out of them by a remarkably bad leadership culture. The important take away is that it was not a bad leader that fucked them spiritually, but a bad culture. I do not know how the culture came to be, but it was rotten to its core, at every level, and that is what made my years there so special.

### Preamble to the Preamble

When, in the course of business events, great opportunities present themselves, great companies will step forward to take those opportunities and become even greater, perhaps even fabulous. Fabulous companies can see opportunity where others see only risk. They see advantage where others only see danger. They see the future where others only see what CNN wants them to see. Fabulous companies make nations great, people wealthy, and the future bright for all of us.

This is not a story of a fabulous company. No greatness will be explained or explored. In fact mediocrity will be embraced, cherished, exalted even, as it would be a significant improvement for this company and this tale which is about to unfold, The Brownies Division of Sextron may seem a farcical tale, like the Millers tale in that Chaucer book, but it is not. It is 100% true, except it is false because I say it is and I do not want to get sued over this, but it is also cautionary, because it is true.

The cautionary part is simple. When your leadership explains a plan to you that makes no sense, it might not make any sense. When you ask questions and the answers seem stupid, they may in fact be stupid. And when you get to the point where you start doubting yourself and your logic because the plan is so bad you think no one can be that stupid, so you must be missing something, rest assured, you probably are not missing something. People can be that stupid, and they can be in leadership positions, earning a lot more than you.

**Preamble** (I know this is really a prologue but I like preamble as a word more)

There are three parts to this. We will talk about the easy part first. For some reason, the corporate parent Sextron always wanted to have factories moved to Mississippi, right out of Memphis, and periodically they did. Invariably these moves were lauded as cost savings, and they usually were made to look that way at first. But there was just something about Memphissippi we could not get right, and usually we either ended up closing the business or moving it back north and then closing it.

The second part is that the Queen of Tarts really, really wanted to prove he could pull it off, and be THE GUY WHO MADE IT WORK. He even upped the ante by deciding to move our distribution center down there, and save even more money by using temp labor. And along the way, we would use a brand new picking software that would be fully integrated with our Submit And Pray system.

The third part is that about ten years after everyone else had gone lean (and some gone back from lean), Sextron decided to go lean. Right about the time everyone was developing Centers of Excellence, we developed the Lean Order, sort of like a bunch of Freemason improvement experts (at least in theory). To make them stand out, they were issued shirts for each day of the week with Lean things embroidered on their pockets.

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Most were tan shirts with colorful lettering, so they looked like a bunch of aged, jowly rogue boy scouts. In hindsight, they should have gone for a star trek look, with the reality that those in the red shirts were inevitably the people they were sent in to help.

1% of our population was declared Expert in Lean, and received lots of Lean Training, including some guys in marketing who did the artwork for our products. To get into Lean, you had to be nominated by your boss. This meant you had to have either a boss who cared about you and your development, or a boss who wanted to get rid of you. No surprise, we got some of both.

Since some of the weaker experts tarnished the group's image, the corporate parent decided we need to celebrate the successes more, and the group became known as the Celebrated Lean Order. Later they were trained in Six Sigma, and became known as the **C**elebrated **L**ean **O**rders **W**ith **k**nowledge of **S**ix **S**igma.

Those who successfully completed the C.L.O.W.N.S.S. program got 500 shares of Sextron Stock, and promoted two levels. At least the first four or five waves did, before most of the top jobs were filled and now blocked by C.L.O.W.N.S.S.

Later, after Wave 57, when there were C.L.O.W.N.S.S. everywhere, things got very political. People were repatriated into their old jobs, or lateral jobs they had no skill set for, and very competent non-C.L.O.W.N.S.S. got overlooked, while some of the C.L.O.W.N.S.S. with 500 shares of stock were getting bitter at not being two levels up. Some were just sad (nothing worse than a sad C.L.O.W.N.S.S. and some were getting disengaged (quitting while still showing up at work), some were never competent so may not have even noticed they were not two levels up, and some were getting angry (angry C.L.O.W.N.S.S. are far worse than sad C.L.O.W.N.S.S.).

It got worse at the three year mark, because you could only be in C.L.O.W.N.S.S. School officially for three years, and then you either repatriated to real work or had to leave the company. The not so good C.L.O.W.N.S.S. had a really tough time, since their old bosses, who often just dumped them in the C.L.O.W.N.S.S. School to get rid of them did, not want them back. No one else wanted them because everyone know which C.L.O.W.N.S.S. were really idiots.

The HR department did not want to get rid of them because we had invested so much money in this hand picked group of experts (and did not want to admit the hand-picking was not quite so smart) so many over stayed their three years but were officially out of the program. The stray C.L.O.W.N.S.S. just wandered around looking for projects, while real managers did their best to avoid them. I can remember ducking down corridors to avoid stray C.L.O.W.N.S.S. and taking circuitous routes to avoid the C.L.O.W.N.S.S. Cube Land.

Every once and awhile, you would get cornered by a stray C.L.O.W.N.S.S. Some of us had "rescue me" signals set up and could get away, other times you were just stuck and

had to think of something the C.L.O.W.N.S.S. could help you with. If you were lucky you had some kanban on productivity board you wanted to put up, and you could give that to them.

It was usually a win-win since all the C.L.O.W.N.S.S. had good arts and crafts skills. Cutting up colored paper into squares, laminating things, and putting Velcro on cards were things that they really seemed to enjoy. At the end of a couple of days you could take a picture of the board and the C.L.O.W.N.S.S. and of the simple factory folk they had just helped, slap it in a power point and send it off to the Queen of Tarts, and get credit for being a "Lean Change Agent".

When the Great Recession started, you know, the one Allstate Man said made us great, non-C.L.O.W.N.S.S. started getting whacked, and their jobs were filled with stray C.L.O.W.N.S.S. At the same time, we decided to move our cupcake distribution to Memphissippi...and this is where the preamble ends, and the horror begins.