The Creation and Destruction of the Order of Maria Theresa

Charles V ruled over an empire in which the sun did not set. This created fantastic communications problems for the officials of the Crown in the remote overseas possessions. They were supposed to carry out faithfully the imperial orders reaching them from Madrid, but often they could not, because the directives were issued an crass ignorance of the local situation or arrived weeks if not months after being decreed by which time they were largely obsolete. In Central America this dilemma led to a very pragmatic solution "Se obedece pero no se cumple" (One obeys but does not comply). Thanks to this recipe, the Central American possessions flourished not because but in spite of the imperial orders from the Escorial. Two centuries later this expedient was awarded official recognition under the reign of Empress Maria Theresa through the establishment of the Order of Maria Theresa. … With refreshing absurdity it was reserved exclusively for officers who turned the tide of battle by taking matters into their own hands and actively disobeying orders.

Paul Watalawick, (The Invented Reality)

Five summers ago I began work as a gas station attendant for Petroco, a large petroleum refiner with gas stations located primarily in the Northeast and North Central United States. Beginning work during mid-July, I worked in both part-time and full-time capacities until June of the following summer.

During this time there were two different managers. The first, Maria Theresa, had worked there for several months prior to my arrival, and lasted until she requested a transfer in mid-May. The second manager, Vincent MacMurdo, took over at that time and continued after I had left. Both of these managers held a bachelor’s degree and had had some previous managerial experience. They had been assigned to this particular station because they had done an especially good job on their previous job assignments, and because the high volume of business made the station something of a proving ground for managers on the rise within the company. However, despite sharing a certain managerial competence, the two managers were as different as day and night.

Maria, for her part, deliberately operated in ways which circumvented the regulations laid down in the operations manuals. Instead of focusing on the letter of the law and enforcing orthodoxy, she sought instead to forge a sense of camaraderie and friendship. Her willingness to bend or disregard the rules was greatly appreciated, by both myself and others, and as a result her attempt to forge a sense of camaraderie was largely successful.

This sense of camaraderie was expressed through four channels: among the crew members, between the crew and Maria Theresa, between the crew and the customers, and in a peculiar way, between the crew, Maria and the district manager. The expression of the crew’s camaraderie manifested itself during every work day, during which one crew member always helped out another, whether by jumping a dead battery, doing a little auto repair, or just running over to the Golden Arches for coffee. For example, during one January day my battery died of natural causes and when we attempted to jump it, we shorted the other car’s electrical system. Where a lesser crew might at that stage have given up, the day crew instead rallied and repaired the short and began making phone calls and legal trips to the junkyard. The results were soon 1) a used but serviceable battery, and 2) the necessary electrical parts and wires. In time, the favors were returned.

The second channel of camaraderie—between the crew and Maria—existed and prospered largely due to Maria’s readily apparent concern for the crew. She would often show up early in the morning with coffee and donuts for the morning crew, or late in the evening with pizza for the evening crew. Her extra efforts on the crew’s behalf were reciprocated whenever Maria needed an extra body because a crew member could not make his/her allotted shift. An indication of the loyalty which we felt for Maria is given by the fact that crew members would frequently volunteer to work another eight hour shift if Maria was going to be short. (The extent of this willing sacrifice can perhaps only be appreciated by those having spent 16 hours standing on concrete!)
The third channel of camaraderie, between crew members and customers, is perhaps best illustrated by the time a couple's car ran out of gas and sputtered to a stop about 1/4 mile from the station. When they asked to borrow the telephone we refused permission—letting a customer use the pay phone inside the station was expressly forbidden, since the safe was inside. However, as we did so, we also offered to push their car the 1/4-mile uphill to the station. In what was soon to be an oft-repeated story, the result was that we were generously rewarded for our efforts with a $15.00 tip and a standing ovation from the several cars waiting patiently in the parking lot. The coup de grace came when the manager of the neighboring McDonald's sent over a complimentary round of cokes as a sign of approval. Interestingly, such behavior was completely against Petrocor rules, which forbade employees to leave the station without managerial approval. Maria—who was not there at the time—gushed with superlatives when she eventually heard the story.

The final expression of camaraderie came about through the peculiar relationship between Maria, the crew and the district manager. The district manager was a well-groomed M.B.A. devoted to enforcing the rules and regulations. One way he did so was to periodically spy on the crew members by parking in the shopping center across the road. However, we always knew he was coming before he “unexpectedly arrived” because of Maria’s early warning system that she had established with other managers. While Mr. Bond was in our midst we were always on model behavior, following Petrocor guidelines to the letter; after he left the station we returned to “normal.” Naturally, the district manager knew something was going on, but because Maria consistently set new all-time sales records, while simultaneously maintaining average “shortages,” he never investigated thoroughly. The crew, having a low tolerance of spies, was not about to inform him otherwise.

During the month of April, Maria began contemplating a move to a smaller station closer to her home in Connecticut. Although our particular station offered her greater prestige, she had begun to miss the community of her family and friends. When an opportunity to move arose in mid-May, Maria initially refused, to the crew’s delight. Eventually, however, she reconsidered and accepted the opportunity to manage closer to home. We were an aggrieved crew, which greeted Vincent MacMurdo.

Vince, for his part, operated by the book in a no-nonsense attempt to establish discipline and order. Where Maria fostered camaraderie, Vince deliberately attempted to foster individual accountability. That a new manager had arrived was quickly driven home to the crew when a crew member was fired for being $2 short for 3 days’ work. When an irate crew member demanded to know what the hell Vince thought he was doing, Vince responded by reading from the operations manual. Quote he, “An employee shall be fired if s/he is $10 short for the month or is $5 short for the week or is $1 short for 2 days; or is $.75 short for 1 day.” During the first two weeks of Vince’s tenure, 3 people were fired for coming up short. When the crew protested that Maria had never done it that way, Vince responded by saying he was not Maria—the crew readily agreed.

The implementation of rule and order extended well past the area of shortages, fundamentally altering the way in which the crew operated. Previously the work crew had consisted of four attendants, one responsible for each island of gas pumps (three in all), and one floating assistant. Under this arrangement, the assistant was free to help wherever needed and the other attendants, if they were free, also helped out. Those helping out would pump gas, wipe windows, check oil and collect the money for the person being helped, and would then give the money to the person assigned to the island at the earliest convenience.

Vince deliberately destroyed the system, arguing that if the “helpers” decided to pocket the money, then the person being helped would be fired for someone else’s theft. However, his Initial instructions to cease and desist were ignored, as the crew members insisted on trusting one another. Eventually, however, Vince laid down the law: anyone collecting money for anyone else would be fired. When a new employee was actually fired for collecting money, the “helper” system ceased. In its place a system emerged where each attendant strayed less and less from his/her “own” island, attending to cleaning and sweeping instead of “helping.” In this way, individual accountability was implemented.
However, the main change was in the relationship between the manager, crew and district manager. Where Maria had worked with, but around, the Petroco’s rules, Vince adopted them as his own. An immediately noticeable effect was that the district manager was around much more than formerly, and most importantly, his pending arrival was not announced to the crew. Thus, his spying missions began to pay off, which only encouraged him to make even more spying missions, as he was beginning to uncover the sins he had long suspected.

One result of this was a reversal of the crew’s long standing concern to help customers. For instance, I began to rigorously enforce the injunction about not pumping gas into running cars (which infuriated people). Although they might plead that their battery was dying, I held the company line. When they told me that if their car did not start, then I would have to jump them, I responded that it was against company policy. One time when a customer could not get his car started, Vince not only refused to let him use the phone, but also called a tow truck himself.

It is important to emphasize that it was not only the crew who reacted to the destruction of the order of Maria Theresa. Customers also reacted, at first by complaining, and then by never returning. About this time strange things began to happen. For example, one night after I refused to pump regular gas into an unleaded tank, the driver of the van I had been arguing with suddenly gunned his engine—and narrowly missed me as I leaped out of the way. Then, even as this story was making the rounds, a woman crew member was run over and injured by a customer who “didn’t see her.” “Accidents” like these just continued to happen: first, several crew members were hurt moving boxes of pump parts; second, another employee suffered an injury that kept her out of work several months, and third, another crew member was suddenly out on workman’s compensation after getting hit by a car door. Then when the bottom had apparently been reached, a woman crew member simultaneously quit and stole several hundred dollars while leaving.

The Saturday Night Massacre

In addition to this accident spree, during mine’s first two months at the station, several major, negative business events occurred. First the sales volume of the station sharply declined. Second, despite Vince’s rigorous application of Petroco’s shortage policy, shortages reached new heights. And third, the district manager reported to Vince that crew service to customers was well below Petroco’s standards. Confronted with these blossoming problems and obvious crew hostility (one crew member he had fired had promised to come back and “discuss” it further), Vince and the district manager settled on a final solution: fire the Order of Maria Theresa. And one by one, the crew was fired, until there were only two of the Order left.

At this time Vince was looking for an assistant to help him keep tabs on the crew, and the choice came down to the two of us, as we were by far the most experienced crew members. The other remaining member was a local high school graduate who, although disliking Vince (his description: “the east end of a west bound horse”), was nevertheless willing to work for him. My position was simple: if nominated I will not run, if elected I will not serve.

Unsurprisingly, I was eventually fired. So ended the Order of Maria Theresa.

Note

1. We were In fact supposed to deny having a phone, despite the fact that the phone rang outside for all to hear.