

Frontlines

BY KEVIN KELLY

Ball of Confusion

*Why did my workers act so unhappy?
Because they felt ignored.*

THE LEAFLET I FOUND in our parking lot read **WHO ARE WE?** in large bold type. The answer appeared in smaller type: INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MACHINISTS AND AEROSPACE WORKERS. Reading those words while I walked from my car to my office brought me to a sudden halt. An organizing drive? At my company? Had I missed something? When a union showed up four years ago, I was well aware that problems existed. Employees were unhappy with their pay and grumbling about certain uncaring managers. But the worst of those grievances had been addressed.

Or had they? The leaflet contained no specific references to our family-owned plastic-bag-manufacturing company and appeared to be written in boilerplate language. We were a few days away from announcing our annual wage-scale increase—the scale itself a leftover practice from the time when we had a union, which was decertified in 1996.

Maybe, I thought, someone is trying to scare us into boosting the size of the

raise. On the other hand, maybe employees really were unhappy enough to bring in a union. Perhaps our fast growth during the past three years—which had left me little time to wander the factory—had blinded me to difficulties.

Whatever the case, I knew where to call: Labor Relations Services, a company based in Newport Beach, Calif., that specializes in helping employers that are battling workers' attempts to win union representation. Yes, they are union-busters, as some folks label them. But what they achieve is broader and more positive than that. They helped us turn back our employees' 2001 attempt to form a union, but they also told us that if we didn't address our workers' concerns, our victory would be short-lived. Employees were angry at us, we learned back then, because we lacked a coherent pay scale, ignored seniority, and tolerated managers with abysmal interpersonal skills. Labor Relations helped us fashion a program to win over our employees. I figured it could help us do that again.

What turned up this time at once pleased and dismayed me. "You have no union problem," the lead consultant assured me

after spending a day talking to our workers. Probably an employee looking to boost his wage increase had plastered the leaflets on his colleagues' windshields during the night shift. But we had other troubles. An issue I had neglected during the last drive—the poor interpersonal skills of some of our managers—was still stoking resentment. I hadn't paid attention to that issue last time because I had addressed so many others, particularly the wage complaints. But now poor communication from and among managers threatened employee morale enough to damage productivity.

Many employees thought that our plant chief micromanaged his direct reports, which left them feeling paralyzed. As a result, machines went unrepaired, weak employees were not terminated, and production suffered. Factions had formed in the factory: those who supported the plant manager,

those who didn't, and those who were disgusted that such divisions even existed. In one department the employees were so splintered that they didn't talk to one another. Output had deteriorated.

I knew that our plant manager, whose thinking was sharp when it came to quality and productivity, didn't have the best people skills. He had risen through the factory and had the unenviable job of managing co-workers to whom he'd once reported. I should have bolstered him with training and coaching. But I shied away from confronting him about his weaknesses.

Now I met with him, discussed his style, and suggested ways to improve. We hired a human-resources manager to help out. I also met with the plant manager's most problematic subordinate and demanded that he quit complaining to other employees and bring his issues to us. We're going to restructure the department in which employees aren't communicating. I've vowed to get out on the shop floor more often. Oh, and I've signed Labor Relations to an agreement so that its consultants will talk with our workers regularly. I don't want to be surprised again. □

Kevin Kelly left full-time journalism eight years ago to run his family's California company, Emerald Packaging.