

CHARLIE'S WHISTLE
By Bob Beaudet, W1YRC

It was Charlie's turn again to host the quarterly meeting of his club's Board of Governors. He's been a member of the board for many years and values that role. He now prefers to serve the club as a Board member rather than as an officer, although he has served in each officer post. Being on the board allows him a wider view of situations as well as a wider opportunity to speak freely and not be so politically correct meetings. If he were the presiding officer, he would have to suppress directing his own thoughts into a floor discussion in favor of leading and promoting an open discussion from the floor. Even when Charlie goes to the ballpark, he always sits mid way up in the grandstand so he might enjoy a wider view of the action. He always wants to see the "big picture" on issues. Before he retired, it was his style as an engineering manager. We hear that his former employees miss that quality greatly. The current management focus energy very tightly and demand that employees not be concerned of issues beyond their immediate responsibilities.

The seven members of the board, composed of five men and two ladies say that they rotate the location of the meeting. The "honor" of hosting the board meeting is decided fairly but their fuzzy math computes that at least one out of four meetings are held on DX Hill. It makes good sense to them. Charlie realizes that being married to one of the best cooks in the club has nothing to do with the computation. No, not much! Hams aren't known for passing up good food very often.

Well, the meeting started on time at 7 PM but before the chairman got past reading the agenda, Mary came into the room carrying a large platter of her trademark blueberry muffins as well as some pecan cookies and lemon tarts. She had just baked them and they smelled wonderful. Yum yum! With those aromas filling everyone's nostrils, it was impossible to continue the meeting since no one was paying attention, so a recess was called. As the seven helped themselves, Mary ran back to the kitchen, motioning Charlie to join her. Once there, she asked, "Dear, take that coffee urn in, would you? I'll take these soft drinks." Charlie did as asked and the gang was ready for him. They had a space cleared, ready for what they knew was coming. Mary left a dozen cans of Coke on the table and she retreated to her den, waving bye. She was showered with many "Thank you's" as she left the room. For certain, the board is welcome and well fed on DX Hill.

Everyone dove into the snacks and enjoyed them thoroughly. The new lemon tarts Mary baked were a great hit and they asked Charlie to get Mary to send the recipe to their e mail addresses as soon as possible. After a few minutes, when they could speak again without a full mouth, the chairman regained control of the meeting and announced the agenda. There were only three items listed and they were all related; declining club membership, lack of interest in project work, and the need of an outreach program to attract young members.

He started, "Guys, we've been wrestling with these problems for a long while and I don't know if there are answers for them. Every club is going through the same thing. but we must turn it around or we'll lose the club. Our meeting attendance is down if it drops much further, we won't have a club at all." Charlie had been thinking quietly while he sipped coffee. He calmly asked the chairman, "Last meeting, we said that the Internet has taken away the need of youngsters to get into ham radio. Do we still feel that way?" Each member confirmed that they still did.

"You know", Charlie looked up to the ceiling as he leaned his chair back against the wall, "Before I retired, I had this one financial analyst working for me. A bit of a strange guy but smart as a whip. He'd often solve problems for me by working them backwards. He would ask me what result I was looking for and enter that number in the bottom right hand line of his analysis spreadsheet. Then, he'd work the numbers in reverse to figure out what the pieces had to be to achieve my result. I always wondered if he learned this creative accounting method in his MBA program or just something he figured out after working for a bunch of engineers for a while. After all, we engineers do something called reverse engineering. You know what result you need and work the design backwards."

The board members listened carefully as Charlie continued, "The way I see it, what we have here isn't too different from an engineering problem. We know the result we want and we know where we are today. What we don't see are the steps to get from A to B. Sure, this is simplistic, but am I about right so far?" There was agreement from the members. Charlie went on, "We've been looking at the Internet as an adversary, competing for our young recruits, pulling them away from ham radio. I don't think that's the problem. What we haven't recognized is just what the Internet is so that we can expose it to them. The Internet and ham radio aren't mutually exclusive at all. In fact they work pretty well

together. But, the Internet isn't anything more than a wonderful tool, not an end in itself but a tool to get there. That's where we can separate ham radio because it's more than a tool.

On the Internet, we can look up more information than we know how to use. It's like an infinitely large library, full of all kinds of reference data and news on just about any field of interest you could name. This does not describe ham radio but it certainly describes a resource to ham radio which many hams, young and old alike haven't fully integrated. So why in the world do we feel we're in competition with it?"

The group listened but didn't seem to understand where Charlie was heading. One asked, "Charlie look, I know you mean well but you don't get it. The Internet is a mega billion dollar resource capable of anything the kids want. They can chat around the world. They don't have to use it according to the whims of band conditions. They don't need towers, antennas, high power or even a license, for Pete's sake. What can hams do to change that?" Charlie smiled in that way that says the spider has caught the fly. He replied, "Joe, by golly, you are precisely correct. What, indeed can we do? What we haven't done so far is recognize exactly the nature of the problem."

Charlie looked around the room and said, "Some of you have said that you see the end of ham radio coming. You know what? I completely agree with you. The ham radio that we knew is gone. It has made its way into history. The Internet will indeed end ham radio...as we have known it!

The glow of big tubes in six foot racks, the smell of tube transmitters when they're hot, the feel of power when a bank of heavy relays close to transmit all have been relegated to the archives. Guys like Mike over here with his great Collins collection, Sam with all his beloved boat anchors and yours truly with big noisy home brew amplifiers are the old breed of ham. Even the need to listen through crashing noise to copy a whisper weak station isn't necessary any more. That skill has been replaced by merely using DSP filters. Technology has made us obsolete.

The new era of ham radio has dawned and it's in locked step with the digital generation. Internet is a partner, not an enemy. What most of us haven't figured out is how to work with the Internet, using it for what it is, a very great tool, just like a saw, hammer, drill or even a computer. All these things are tools, not an end product in themselves. They're just tools, facilitating our adventure.

Our challenge, ladies and gentlemen, is a complex marketing one. It isn't technical. Strategic advertising and marketing will solve it with folks like us. We have a fabulously magical hobby where we aren't dependent upon microprocessor clock speed, ISP problems, hard drive crashes or any of those kinds of inhibiting problems. What we deal with is nature, unpredictable and quirky as it is, in getting an electromagnetic wave to radiate from an antenna through the ether to another antenna many miles away. I don't know about everyone in this room, but I've been licensed over 50 years and I still get chills when I think how much magic I control every time I key my transmitter. We are dealers of magic!

Our marketing challenge is to get that word out there to all those computer enthusiasts and draw some of them into amateur radio. Making meetings interesting for present club members is every bit as essential because without them, we have no base to build upon or leadership to carry out the mission. We have the skills and we have the motive; the survival of ham radio and next generation of hams to take our places."

There was silence in the room as Charlie stopped and took a long sip of coffee and munched a cookie. Then, one by one, they clapped and agreed with Charlie. He simply sat and listened as the chairman spoke to the board, "Thanks, Charlie. You distilled it for us, I think. I guess we have our mission statement now, don't we? I think we have a few ideas how to change our approaches. We have to reach out and show what we can do. Let's recommend to the club's general membership that we establish an action committee to list priorities for our fall program. Things like classes for the scout troops, presentations at the community college, info tables and demo stations at computer shows. At the same time, let's be watchful that current members are engaged into the process of activities, like show and tell events, station activities, new equipment reviews and demos. Our present members don't come to meetings just to hear treasurer and secretary's reports. Let's liven the meetings up with activities.

As Charlie told us, our hobby has changed and if we don't change with it, we won't have a future, we'll just have a part of history listed in the archives."

