

## CHARLIE'S WHISTLE

By

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Aren't your days taxing sometimes? The same old grind and the same old routine? It's safe to say that every one of us have felt that way at one time or another. Charlie isn't much different from any of us in that way. His fellow club members invariably see Charlie as upbeat, alert and always friendly and willing to help them in anything they're doing. His wife, Mary would agree for the most part but lately, even she would agree that Charlie's not been himself. Oh, of course he still can be counted on to help everyone needing it and is still everyone's friend but those closest to him have detected some change in him recently.

Often these days, his friends have to first call him to enlist his help in a project. But, not that many years ago, he would have always made the first call anytime something needed doing or fixing. He seems to have lost some spring in his step. His friends have wondered if it's simply aging. Could be, I suppose but Charlie's not that old. So, what is it then? The best answer of what's been bothering him comes from Charlie himself.

Charlie started to notice some changes several months ago. Fewer and fewer club members were showing up at club meetings and club events. More effort was needed and by steadily fewer volunteers to get almost anything done. Invariably, the last people standing at the club were becoming a little tired and grumbled more than normal over always having to do all the work. As with most old timers, Charlie occasionally could be heard calling a reference to the way things were years ago. They say that's the surest sign of getting old. Never the less, the truth is that change had been taking place all around Charlie but he hadn't fully realized it until now and that bothers him plenty.

A few months ago, the club Activities Manager sent out a Field Day call for volunteers. He used e mail, snail mail, phone calls, sign up lists at the meetings, announcements on the weekly ARES net, postings on the club reflector and about any other way he could think of to form an operating and logistics team for Field Day. How many do you think signed up out of 75 paid members? He was shocked that only eight made solid commitments to participate and of those, a couple did so with conditions. One actually said that if their next door neighbor's daughter had a birthday party on Saturday, he couldn't be at Field Day at all until mid morning on Sunday! The party was scheduled to be from 2 to 4 on Saturday and it was only 50% sure anyway due to unsure grandparents' plans to attend. Yet, he opted out of FD except for a few hours at its end. Now, that certainly was a creative alibi! Charlie had helped the Activities Manager trying to stir up interest in participating in this traditional club event and felt the frustration. Only 10% had any interest and the average age of that 10% was about 75. With only eight participants, anything more than participating in Class 1A would be silly, with the setup, take down, etc. Luckily, two of the club's best contest operators had signed up for the entire 24 hours so if they wanted to do so, they could keep the single station on for the entire period by themselves. All the rest of the team had to do was fuel the generator and feed everyone. It was hardly a "club activity" and Charlie was disgusted.

Interest in pitching in and carving out the Field Day weekend was nearly completely absent. Charlie can remember years ago when one of the local High Schools tried to hold its graduation on Field Day weekend and had so many people complain that they decided to hold it a week earlier. Not that so many hams alone had sons or daughters graduating but with all the other people involved, it was a major event in the community. The FD team used to include many Fire, Police, Emergency Service and Red Cross personnel who all included FD as part of their annual practice schedule, supplying generators, first aid practice, canteen provisions, etc. Adding the merchants, news media and the fact that Field Day always took place in the High School athletic field.... Well, you can see the problem. That was thirty years ago when virtually the entire club pitched in every fourth weekend of June for Field Day without question. No notices were needed. Everyone knew at Christmas time when Field Day was. Even wedding dates were planned to avoid conflict with Field Day. Today, the in-law backlash might be severe for that degree of respect to the event but years ago, time for Field Day was like the first day of fishing or hunting season. You simply didn't interfere with that date!

True to his roots, the engineer and manager in Charlie came to life after this year's FD experience. Like so many of the old timers, he was disappointed and dismayed that there was so little interest. The trend downward was apparent before now but this year's turnout was really very poor. So, he started breaking down the symptoms of the problem into its components and quickly found that something similar had been taking place in his wife Mary's crafts group and their church's after hour clubs and even the Little League in town. Membership in all these organizations has been dropping off lately and the remaining members have had to bear a larger share of duties than they might prefer to keep basic activities from falling apart. Each type of organization has some unique problems for sure, but a great many common issues remain in evidence.

After dinner, Mary and Charlie usually take a walk along with Rufus. They chat about all sorts of things from the world situation to their grandchildren. Tonight, Charlie was unusually quiet. Mary learned long ago that when her engineer husband was like that, wheels in his on-board computer mind were spinning. She just let him think while she admired the new Nasturtiums that she had planted along the road in front of their neighbor's side yard. "Oh look Charlie, aren't these beautiful?" Charlie politely nodded and said, "uh huh". Mary knew he was preoccupied so she just walked along with him wondering what was on his mind.

When they returned home, Mary picked up a bag full of fabric remnants that her crafts group was going to make into a quilt. She had enough sorting to keep her busy for the evening. Charlie found a legal pad and pencil over by the couch, where he does much of his thinking now that he's retired. He sat and started writing, paused, then wrote some more. After an hour of doing this with Mary glancing up at him frequently, Charlie looked at the mantle clock and asked, "Mary, do you think that Jack and Ellen might be home now?" Jack is their son who teaches at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign and Ellen is Jack's wife who also teaches and does research. Neither are hams but both are positively brilliant. Jack's in Optics Engineering and Ellen's in Agricultural Research.

Mary looked at the clock first and replied, "Well, I spoke with Ellen yesterday morning. They were going out last night but should be home tonight. I think they're both reading graduate papers." With that, Charlie picked up the phone and dialed. What do you know? Ellen answered on the first ring.

"Well hi there sweetheart. How's my favorite daughter-in-law tonight?" Charlie asked as Mary scurried to pick up the kitchen telephone. He started by asking how everyone was and what the kids had done today. Mary chats with Ellen a couple of times a week but Charlie, true to his pragmatic habits, waits for a reason to call. So, he went to his question. "I've been doing some work for my club and an idea hit me that you might be able to help see it from a better direction." Ellen was anxious to help. Just then, Jack picked up an extension and all four chatted for a while about the grandchildren, the summer grad school schedule, how many students they had, shortage of qualified teaching assistants, overloaded post-doc program and lots of other things.

After ten minutes of this kind of family chatter, Ellen asked Charlie, "So, what was your question, Dad?" Charlie loved to hear her call him Dad. That meant so much to him. Ellen's own Dad had passed away while she was just starting college, nearly twenty years ago and Ellen has embraced and loves Charlie as her own. He often wishes her real Dad could see what a wonderful person his "Doctor daughter" has become. He'd be so very proud. Charlie asked, "Can either of you think of any reason why people your age and younger aren't joining clubs or any kind of organizations in the same numbers or proportions that our generation seemed to?" There was silence. Jack asked, "Well Dad, I really don't know. Do you know if that's actually true? For all clubs?" Charlie replied that it surely seemed to be so, at least for the ones he knew about. Mary joined in agreeing with him.

There was silence for a few moments and then Ellen offered, "We have a close friend who teaches here at UIUC and does research in that kind of behavior. She's Vice Chair of the Sociology Department. She and her husband are coming for dinner this weekend. We can ask her for you. OK?" Mary saw Charlie nodding and answered, "Yes dear, that would be fine. We both really appreciate your help." Then they talked more about family things and ended the call.

Charlie sat quietly and wondered. “What do you suppose it is, Mary? The economy? 9/11 fear? What is it? I can’t seem to figure this one out and it really bothers me.” Mary realized that the problem wasn’t one that could be expressed in engineering terms. She also realized that not being able to solve a problem will bother Charlie until he can solve it. She finally said, “Well dear, we were smart enough to have children who can help us at times like this, weren’t we?” Charlie smiled and headed for the shack to see what the eastward band conditions would bring in on 40.

It was Monday afternoon when Ellen called with some information. Mary answered and quickly called Charlie in from the back yard where he was doing some cable work at the base of the tower. When all were together, Ellen explained, “Golly, you really uncovered something here! What do you know about Generation X”, she asked? Both Mary and Charlie admitted they knew only that it was the generation after the Baby Boomers and little else.

Ellen explained, “Well, understanding some Gen X thinking will answer lots of your questions or at least help you to understand what’s going on, I think.” Charlie listened intently as she continued. “There was a 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and sociologist named Alexis de Tocqueville who explained the basis for this phenomenon nearly two centuries ago. In a widely read standard reference document among social scientists called ‘Democracy in America’, he talked about how the social needs of the individual are served by social and moral associations. He was a visionary in his time, forecasting the nature of social behavior of our 21<sup>st</sup> century fairly well. Modern sociologists have extrapolated his data to apply to many other modern segments of US society.”<sup>1</sup>

Mary interrupted, “Dear, I’m sorry but you’re above my head.” Charlie joined in, “Mine also, Ellen. What does this fellow in the 19<sup>th</sup> century say that explains why we can’t find more interest in joining clubs today?” Ellen chuckled, “I’m so sorry. This stuff quickly gets pretty deep. What he said and current social commentators have said as well is that we all need the benefits of group associations for intellectual, economic and civil benefit. Modern writings have used the works of de Tocqueville’s to illuminate why the millions of citizens between the ages of 20 and 40, our so-called ‘Generation X’ behave outside the manner of their predecessors and to some extent, their successors, the so-called ‘Y Generation’”.

Ellen explained, “X Gen’s enshrine political apathy as a way of life. They’re far less trusting of officials, authority or interested in learning reasons for many laws, customs, or practices. There’s a general decline in social trust among the young, whether it’s trust in their fellow citizens, in established institutions, or in elected officials. These tendencies are, of course, related: heightened individualism and materialism, as de Tocqueville pointed out, tend to isolate people from one another, weakening communal bonds that give meaning and force to notions of national identity and common good.” She continued, explaining that with so many millions of Gen Xers dominating the general population, conventional thinking has become more than tainted by its thinking. It has become the norm.”<sup>2</sup>

Jack had been quiet while Ellen reported her findings but now he wanted to be heard, “Dad, Mom, this doesn’t mean that Gen Xers like us are bad people. It says that as a group, we’ve learned to be dependant more upon ourselves than anyone or anything else. In general, our generation doesn’t feel completely trusting in anyone else but themselves. Further, many feel they have no need for dependence on anyone. It can be both admirable in personal development and at the same time, painful to parents, managers and associates. It becomes an easy leap to see why so few see the need to engage in the social benefits of a club, fraternal organization, union, team or a political party. Membership in all these organizations has dropped steadily over the last several years and seems to be directly the effect of this intellectual process.”

Charlie had been taking copious notes while propping the phone to his ear with his shoulder. Mary was pleased that her brilliant son and daughter-in-law had discovered the apparent correct information for

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<sup>1</sup> "Unity and Community in the Twenty-First Century", Ted Halstead, New American Foundation and Michael Lind, Whitehead Senior Fellow, National Civic Review, June 1, 2002

<sup>2</sup> A Politics for Generation X, Ted Halstead, The Atlantic Monthly, August 31, 1999

Charlie. That made her so very happy. After writing the last words, Charlie quipped, "That's what I love about Professors. You can ask them for the time and they'll build you a watch." Ellen and Jack chuckled over that and apologized for such clinical gibberish. "No no, son. It's not that at all. You've hit what I wanted on the nose. What you didn't tell me was what we can do about it."

Ah yes, what indeed. But, Charlie is pleased in one way, at least. The first step in development of an engineer's solution to any problem is to fully define it and identify the problems' sources and details. Jack and Ellen have surely done that.

Even after a problem is defined, a solution may be unclear or even impossible. Either the solution is beyond our ability, technology or beyond our interest, budget or desire to achieve it. Then, on occasion we encounter problems like this one involving the behavior of an entire generation. Sigh..... Oh well, we've identified and defined one problem and that's progress. Could the reason for slackened interest in club support be something other than simply Gen X phenomena? Surely it could be, but understanding the Gen X influence better helps us begin to consider all the possibilities.

In the meanwhile, make those phone calls and start planning your fall programs now to attract new members to your clubs. It will take more work than you expect. You may have to do more than your fair share but the goal is worth the effort. Your personal effort can make a difference!

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