



Strive to be Ordinary

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In a world where “ordinary suppliers are 100 percent on time and provide Zero Defects,” how can your precision machining shop become *extraordinary*? By being truly ordinary, of course.

How many of your customers’ suppliers are “truly ordinary” as given by the definition above? If you’re thinking “not too many,” you’re probably right.

The above-mentioned quote was used against me on a sales call when I was business development manager for a steel mill start-up company. “Your ordinary suppliers do that?” I asked, incredulously. “Of course,” was the answer. “Or they would not be my suppliers.”

At that time, believing for the moment that the buyer was not “telling me a fiction,” I struggled to think of a way we could become extraordinary. Differentiate ourselves from the ordinary. Go the extra mile. Make ourselves different.

We sent in one of our top metallurgical engineers to help the customer improve its machinability and process uptime using its preferred grade. We developed an improved annealing process to assure that the customer received a consistent annealed structure.

We were sure that would give the customer a more uniform performing product. More uniformity means less variability and thus more uptime. Uptime

means parts at the end of the day. Parts at the end of the day mean sales. And sales mean dollars. Yay!

I would like to tell you that those extra efforts did the trick, and that they delivered us the customer. However, if I told you that, I would be telling you a fiction, just as the buyer that day was telling me a fiction about the performance of his ordinary suppliers.

You see, while we were in his shop giving away free consulting in the hopes it would result in future orders, we also learned that a bank of screw machines over there was down because supplier ABC was late. And, all that steel piled up at the end of the bay with the red tags was from supplier XYZ and was rejected for this reason or that.

So, where was the steel from those ordinary suppliers that the buyer kept bragging about?

Unknown to us, it was being melted, rolled, cold-finished and annealed in our shop. That customer’s buyer had set a very high bar. And a brand new, inexperienced, business development manager took it for gospel that we had to hit the bar of “100 percent on time and Zero Defects,” if



we were going to become one of the company’s ordinary suppliers and favored with truck-load business.

So, instead of business as usual — “thanks for the order, we’ll call you when it’s ready to ship” — our little start-up looked at the requirements, analyzed the end use, invested in and gave away some free consulting.

We wanted to really understand how the material performed at the customer’s. We implemented documented processes to assure that the things the customer really cared about — what the machinists cutting the steel, not just the buyer, really cared about — were achieved and delivered. Under statistical control.

As a result, we were able to become an ordinary supplier to that company, on that particular product. Yes, we became an ordinary supplier. Which

“Ordinary suppliers are 100 percent on time and provide Zero Defects.”

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actually made us extraordinary to that customer. Because we became what he defined as “ordinary.” Got that?

It was not our efforts to become extraordinary that won us the business. At best, those efforts got us the chance to get trial orders and to demonstrate our sincerity

and perhaps our capability. It was what we did to become “ordinary suppliers, 100 percent on time and Zero Defects” that delivered the business.

How about you? Are you an ordinary supplier? What would it take for your shop to become merely ordinary? And what would the rewards be?

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