

Swanson, R. A. (1991). Do you do voodoo? *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 2 (4), 305-306.

Do You Do Voodoo?

I didn't win the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes. After all these years, the rational side of me gave way, and I entered. It was a Friday night, I was tired, and I was dreaming out loud with my kids. Christina wanted a new Jeep Cherokee, Eric selected a Mustang convertible, and I can no longer recall what I wanted. Filling out my personalized chance for the Publisher's Clearinghouse multimillion dollar prize was my Friday-night avenue to realizing these material dreams. For the moment, the dream truly felt good. We jabbered about our winnings that night and on following occasions. The reality is that I did not expect to win; I've studied statistics, and I knew my odds. Theoretically, I had a slim but real chance to win the big prize, and, with a little luck, I could have won.

I understand odds. With all the problems of life to be solved and the plausible options for each, the odds on my choosing the best options have been all over the scale. In almost all instances I've tried to figure them and have felt their relative weights. I have occasionally been surprised by the deviations from the odds.

I also understand luck at the experiential level. Without any direct planning or input on my part, I ended up with a set of parents, a country, an economic era, and so on that make me a very lucky person. I understand being the recipient of good luck. I try not to confuse it with my personal competence.

Superstition is where I exit. I tease about my "power tie"—the red tie I wore the day I made a good business deal—but I haven't even been tempted to wear it for the purpose of a superstitious advantage. I am not into superstition or voodoo. I'll leave that to the jocks and upper management. Yes, you heard me—upper management. I just received a "this-will-bring-you-good-luck-so-you-better-not-break-the-chain" letter with copies of transmittal letters from corporate CEOs. I couldn't believe it. One was from Harold Poling, CEO of Ford Motor Company. In passing on the chain he writes, "With a year like this I'll try anything."

I have used Roger Smith of General Motors, Lee Iacocca of Chrysler, and Donald Peterson of Ford as the classic trilogy of United States management models. Peterson was my hero. I have been a Ford shareholder since 1962, and Peterson's leadership felt right to me, theoretically and functionally. In my references to these three corporate leaders, it never crossed my mind that superstition might be an element in their strategies. Now I'm not sure.

Since Peterson's departure, I've heard that Ford is cutting back on its

commitment to total quality management, and I am aware of their recent economic problems. But the resort to a chain letter makes me want to call my stockbroker. Poling should not have acted alone in this matter. A cross-functional team of Ford workers would have handled the situation better. I'm sure that many of Poling's assembly workers would have advised him that it would be better odds to play the Michigan lottery with company funds. At least with the lottery you have some odds—a rational chance to win, slim as it might be. I would bet that the idea of improving the economic performance of Ford Motor Company by passing on a superstitious chain letter would not have gotten out the work team's front door.

When I was in college, another student openly complained to our professor that a particular student got all the breaks. The professor's forceful answer was that "people make their own breaks." The luck of the cards one has been dealt is a given, but the playing of the hand is based on intellect, experience, and hard work—and on working smarter, not just working harder. Superstition and voodoo have no place in the milieu of top management or human resource development or in the actions of business and industry employees, whether on the sales floor or in the boardroom. Donald Peterson hasn't been gone from Ford very long, and I already miss him.

RICHARD A. SWANSON
EDITOR

