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# High Performance Organization: Saturn

James L. Lewandowski

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Jim Lewandowski spent 35 years at General Motors. His last assignment was vice president for human resources on the Saturn Project in Spring Hill, Tennessee. Now he specializes in organizational culture and change efforts using Saturn-like concepts and principles. He left Saturn in 1990, just as the first cars rolled out. "If you do what you've always done," he says, "you get what you always got." That's why the Saturn Project started with a clean sheet.

The Saturn Project transformed him from a manager to a leader. He notes, "I had to learn to operate out of my comfort zone." He and six other GM executives were given this assignment without being told why they were specifically selected, nor how to create a new car and a new company concept.

Saturn was to be a high performance operation, and instead of mere customer satisfaction, the group of seven committed themselves to "customer enthusiasm." Besides changing buying patterns, this crew had to regain the market share lost to the Japanese and change the worker organizations. The chief engineer bought a fleet of Hondas and Mitsubishis and told his engineers to "drive 'em until you puke."

Lewandowski was in charge of relocating thousands of families from GM plants across the country and dealing with their unions in this new way of doing business. Before Saturn, his job in Detroit was to "screw the union and not let them screw us," but in Tennessee, things were different. "People want to be involved in the decisions that affect them." There were differences of opinion with the UAW, but "we drank

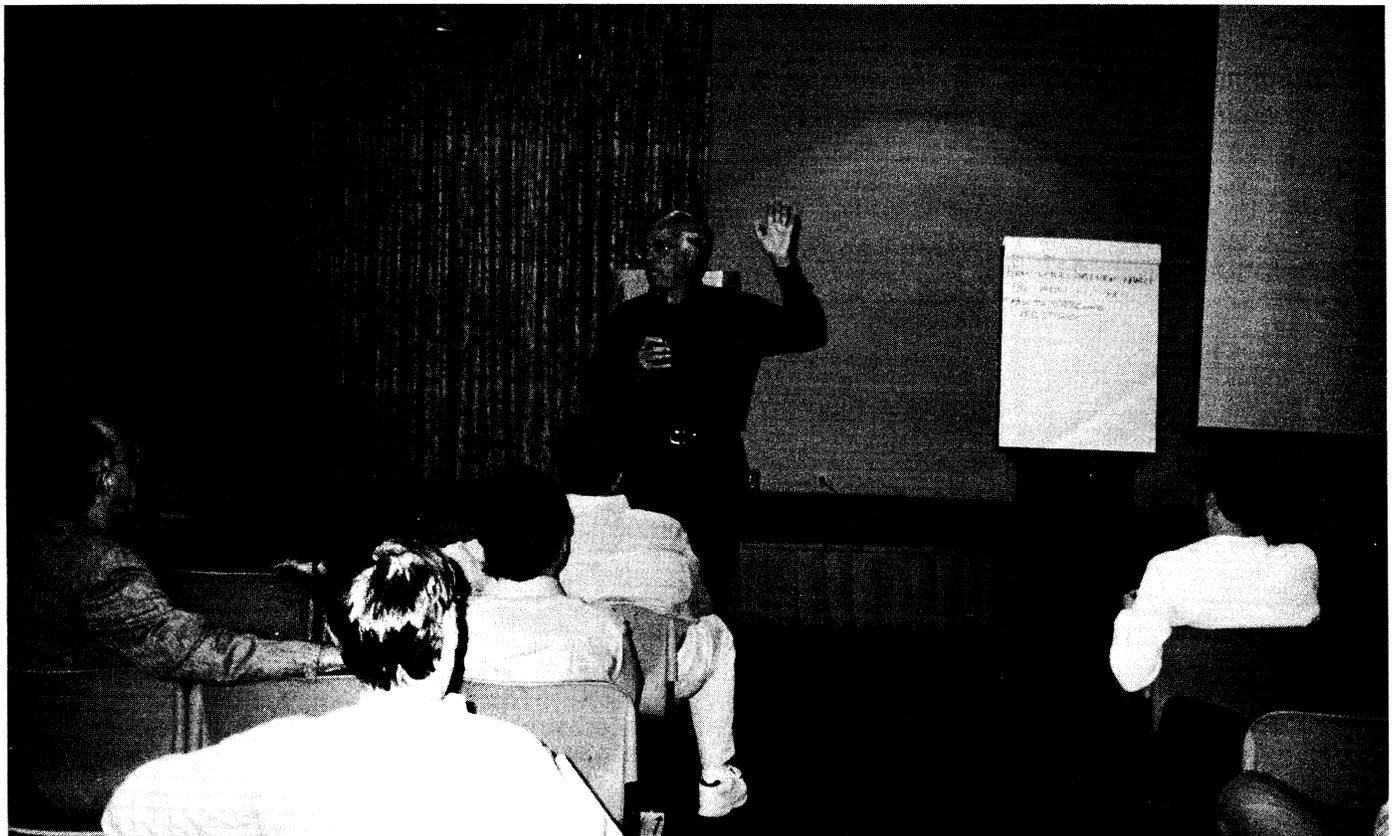


Figure 18. Jim Lewandowski at the PMSEP in Virginia Beach

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beer afterwards, never held a grudge and never tried to get even.” The result was a total of only three written grievances in the first five years, filed by the union to avoid unfair labor practices. Lewandowski found it “much harder to be a coach or champion than a Boss.”

His biggest challenge was to move thousands of union families from Detroit to a rural community in a dry county of a right-to-work state. “High performance companies live and die by mission statements,” he noted, and his was simple and clear: “No teen suicides.” Families, thus, assumed an importance unheard of before in an organization on the move, and kids got a lot of attention during the big change. Saturn did have a rather high rate of divorce among couples, but Lewandowski figures that many urban folks brought some problems with them to the country. “People come first,” was their slogan. “Some people never learn to trust though,” Lewandowski said. So, what do you do? Fire them? “No,” he said. “Coach them, counsel them and hope that they quit or retire soon.” His first challenge was to get his fellow executives to stop wearing neckties.

Another big change for GM was this Tennessee transformation into a learning organization. “We called Spring Hill a ‘campus’ for we were continuously learning,” he recalls. Trying to involve the

whole family in Saturn events and celebrations was a priority.

Lewandowski drew applause from the delegates to the Project Management Shared Experiences Program when he said: “You know, the problem is we rely too much on metrics” and not enough on people. He advises project managers to “involve your stakeholders in any change process.”

Change and continuous improvement are part of the culture at Saturn. Employees are even required to get 90 hours of training per year, with part of their risk/reward compensation tied to their objective.

Lewandowski remembers the glory days of Saturn, but faced with the prospect of returning to Detroit to push papers, he chose to keep the dream alive by telling the Saturn story over and over again, hoping that his experience-based perspective will assist leaders and managers confronted by the cross currents of change.

*James Lewandowski  
People Systems International  
550 W. Flamingo Dr., Ste. 204  
Venice, FL 34285  
(941) 484-0111*