

THE UN-COMFORT ZONE

With Robert Wilson

I Dare You to Read This

Recently, a reader wrote me to suggest that rather than trying to encourage someone, a better way to motivate them is to issue a challenge. So, I felt challenged to write about it.



Whenever I think of laying down a challenge, I think of a classic story about Charles Schwab the magnate of Bethlehem Steel. One day, he was visiting his least productive mill to discover why it was underperforming. During his inspection, he discovered that everything seemed to be in order: the workers all knew their jobs, the equipment was top-notch, and the manager highly educated. Despite all of that, it was producing far behind all his others.

He ended his tour of the facility a few minutes before shift change. Stopping in front of one of the furnaces, he asked a worker, "How many heats has your shift made today?" "Six," the man replied. Schwab then asked for a piece of chalk. He took it, wrote a large number "6" on the floor, then left the building.

When the second shift arrived, they saw the chalked "6" on the floor, and inquired about it. "The big boss was in here today," said one of the men. "He asked us how many heats we made, and we told him six. He chalked it down."

The next morning Schwab visited the same mill. He saw that the "6" had been erased by the second shift and a large number "7" written in its place. He returned to the mill again at the end of first shift, where he saw that the "7" had been replaced with a "10." With a piece of chalk, Schwab started a lively competition that continued until that mill was producing more than any other.

This particular challenge worked because it pitted the esprit de corps of two teams against each other. I'm not sure that particular challenge would work today with the added burden of government regulations and union rules.

I also believe that a challenge does not stand alone as a motivator. There has to be something behind it. It may be pride, prestige, or fear that drives the need to overcome the obstacle.

Challenges are always obstacles whether it is an athletic, academic, intellectual, work-related, health-related, a personal goal or a personal tragedy. Sometimes the challenge is given by a boss, a team mate, a spouse, or simply the zeitgeist.

Many times a challenge will be issued with the following words: "I'll bet you can't..." or "I dare you to..."

A challenger draws a line in the sand and defies us to cross it. Hmm, isn't that what the game of American football is all about?

The advertising industry loves to use a challenge to get us to try their product or service. We frequently see words such as "Take the Taste Test," or "Give Us 30 Days and You'll Become a Believer." I remember this one from Gillette: "Take the SensorExcel Challenge: One shave and we bet you'll get rid of your disposable razor for good." Perhaps the most famous challenge ad is this one: "Be All That You Can Be: In The Army."

We love fun challenges such as problems that stimulate our ingenuity: crossword puzzles and sudoku for example. We enjoy the challenge of improving our skill at games and sports. OK, the love/hate challenge of golf notwithstanding.

Ultimately, all our challenges are self-given because it is human nature to want to improve. Pablo Picasso said it best, "I am always doing that which I cannot do, in order

that I may learn how to do it."

The personal challenges we give ourselves create the journey known as life. Enjoy the pitfalls and peaks as they come because as Leo Buscaglia, author and professor, put it most bluntly, "Death is a challenge. It tells us not to waste time."

I challenge you to heed his advice and get on with the important things in your life.

Robert Evans Wilson, Jr. is an author, humorist and innovation consultant. He works with companies that want to be more competitive and with people who want to think like innovators. Robert is also the author of the humorous children's book: *The Annoying Ghost Kid*. For more information on Robert, please visit www.jumpstartyourmeeting.com