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The 'Whatever' Syndrome

by Marien Helz

In the last forty years, we have seen a decline in professionalism in most of the time honored fields in which people formerly took great pride in their work and in the significance of the field. We have come to the point at which lawyers want to win cases, right or wrong, to enhance their careers; doctors think more about being victimized by lawsuits than about making sound medical decisions; insurance companies want to make money at the expense of all clients. Parents are concerned about their children getting good grades rather than about whether or not they have learned what they need to know; teachers want to appease parents rather than ensure that pupils do the hard work needed to gain the foundation knowledge that is required to advance appropriately in learning.

This, of course, is a generalization, and like most generalizations is not wholly true. It does, however, appear to be a trend, and it is a trend developed by people who are more interested in driving their flashy cars to the golf course as soon and as often as they can.

Part of the cause of this problem is that money has become far too much a part of the reward for professions. Psychologists who study intrinsic and extrinsic rewards found that once extrinsic rewards were introduced, the intrinsic motivation diminishes. In other words, when gold stars are introduced for work well done, the desire to do work well for its own sake is destroyed. On the professional level, the desire to have huge salaries becomes a motivator which obliterates the desire to excel in one's field for the sake of the profession.

Another part of the problem is the *Whatever Syndrome*—this is simply a pervasive attitude that precision and effort don't matter. It's the outlook that enables some people to wear blue jeans to a funeral. It's the posture that causes some people to dress the same to go to the movies or to go to fine theater, to dress the same to go to McDonald's fast food or to O'Donnell's Seafood Restaurant.

About three decades ago, John Malloy made a career of researching the relationship between professional dress and professional success. In case after case, he demonstrated that dressing professionally—not fashionably—resulted in greater success for the professional and greater respect from the client. Malloy did well enough for himself that he gave up fighting the fashion industry that hated him for demonstrating that dressing in the latest new fad was a career terminating mistake. Malloy emphasized dressing appropriately for the occasion, and his legacy is the professional jackets which men and women both wear and concepts like, “dress for the job you want, not for the job you have.”

Post-Malloy came dress-down Fridays followed by dress-down Thursdays, Wednesdays, Tuesdays, and Mondays, to the point where one can go into a professional office and see people dressed the same as they do when they take out their garbage. Along with the lack of effort in dress is the lack of respect for clients. Office workers assume that they may address strangers by

their first names. Such familiarity in dress and in social decorum leads to more of the *Whatever Syndrome*—why bother with doing things exactly right, only an “anal retentive” [a term of which the terminally sloppy are enamored for it appears to justify a lack of effort] will care.

Recently some offices have looked into company dress practices and have found that with relaxed dress has come more problems ranging from work standards to sexual harassment charges. They have attempted to precede “dress-down Friday” with “dress-up Thursday.” That’s a practice which is likely to be as successful as putting a band aid on a hemorrhage.

What’s needed is an all-out assault on the *Whatever Syndrome*—an insistence on appropriate (neither flamboyant nor sloppy) dress; an insistence on addressing clients appropriately, not as though they have only one name like a dog; an insistence on working for excellence and doing things correctly. This isn’t a formula for an extraordinary society; it’s merely a system for maintaining the type of ordinary system that is worthwhile for people to live in.

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Los Alamos National Laboratory

Part I—Historical Perspectives

Cheryl Rofer is a chemist who worked for the Los Alamos National Laboratory for 35 years. During that time, she worked on laser isotope separation, fossil fuel chemistry, and the development of hazardous waste destruction technologies, and managed one of the largest environmental cleanups at Los Alamos. She retired from the lab in 2001 to devote more time to international consulting. She now works with a group in Estonia cleaning up a former Soviet uranium processing plant and a group in Kazakhstan cleaning up the former Soviet Union nuclear test site.

by Cheryl Rofer

Removable computer disks lost, classified information e-mailed, a student's eye damaged by a laser. A dismal performance on the part of the nation's first nuclear weapons laboratory. Along with the Wen Ho Lee episode and the loss of classified hard disk drives after the Cerro Grande fire of 2000, reason enough, some say, to remove the University of California as the manager of the *Los Alamos National Laboratory*.

Pundits and politicians sniff that intelligent people should be able to do better. But a long history has led up to the incidents at *Los Alamos* and to the attention focused on them. Blame is easy if you are looking for publicity and reasons to shift a plum contract. Solving problems is harder.

Flare-ups followed by inadequate analysis have been misleading. I encounter otherwise well-informed friends who believe that Wen Ho Lee sold secrets to the Chinese, although those charges were dropped by the government in a plea bargain. It's hard to understand what is going on at *Los Alamos* without some historical context.

Many things have changed at *Los Alamos* since its beginning in the Manhattan Project, the crash program to develop an atomic bomb in World War II. Changes in the way scientific research is practiced, the role of the national laboratories, and how security is maintained are coming together in a damaging way, mixed with today's divisive politics.

The Manhattan Project itself changed the nature of scientific research, which then changed again. Research has always had two aspects: one like composing music or writing poetry, for the joy of it, and the other for solving practical problems. Their interaction promotes the growth of science and technology. Together, they provide vaccines against disease, cell phones and personal computers, and gas-saving cars, along with cruise missiles and nuclear weapons.

The Manhattan Project brought together these two aspects to develop nuclear weapons very rapidly; Nazi Germany was believed to be hot on the nuclear trail. Within twenty-six months, two nuclear weapons of different design, one using plutonium, a new element that had never been seen before 1940, were developed. Vannevar Bush, in his 1945 report, "Science—The Endless Frontier," recognized the possibilities in this interactive approach and urged the

government and universities to extend it. The great successes of Bell Labs, including the development of the transistor, came about in this way.

Industry practiced this model of research through the 1980s. In that decade, deregulation led to the disassembly of Bell Labs, and the oil companies downsized their large research laboratories. As the universities became more involved in research during the 1950s and 1960s, a distinction grew between basic and applied research, with basic research not being obviously applied to any specific problem. “Curiosity-driven research” seems to have replaced basic research and carries that concept one step further. I haven’t been able to find a formal definition of curiosity-driven research, but it seems to mean research whose only object is to satisfy the curiosity of the researcher. It has become the Holy Grail of university research, and that value judgment has spread among PhDs, including those at the Lab.

Curiosity-driven research is necessarily the vision of a single person, ideally suited to the university environment of individual professors in carefully-defined departments where individual professors compete for individual grants of funding. It is the opposite of the integrated multidisciplinary research of the Manhattan Project.

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The federal government operates an enormous number of laboratories. The military services research better explosives, how sound carries through the sea, and ways to make planes invisible to radar. The Departments of Agriculture and Interior, and the Environmental Protection Administration run laboratories that support their missions. A few federal laboratories, connected historically with nuclear weapons, have been designated “national laboratories.” *Argonne* (Chicago), *Brookhaven* (Long Island), *Oak Ridge* (Tennessee), *Pacific Northwest* (Hanford WA), *Sandia* (Albuquerque), *Lawrence Berkeley* (California), and *Los Alamos* (Los Alamos NM) all originated in the Manhattan Project. *Lawrence Livermore*, the other weapons design laboratory, was formed in 1954 as a result of Edward Teller’s arguments with the *Los Alamos* management.

Nuclear policy for the Manhattan Project was to develop a nuclear bomb before Germany did. Germany, it turned out, had no significant nuclear program and surrendered before the bomb was ready. But Japan continued the fight and felt the nuclear hammer. The dropping of the two bombs *Los Alamos* produced in the summer of 1945 ended the war with Japan.

After the war, the US offered the Baruch Plan to internationalize atomic energy to the newly-formed United Nations, but the Soviet Union turned it down. US nuclear policy drifted, and many of the scientists and engineers left *Los Alamos* to return to their universities or industries. It soon became clear, however, that the US would have to continue designing and manufacturing nuclear weapons. The University of California, which had taken on the Lab’s management in 1943, was willing to continue the job.

The hardships and isolation of the war years, the enormity of the weapons themselves, and the near-collapse of the Lab at the end of the war produced a strong sense of community and purpose in those who remained. The explosion of a Soviet atomic bomb in 1949 and the race to produce a thermonuclear weapon in the early 1950s, along with the creation of Teller’s *Livermore National Laboratory*, firmed up that sense of community and purpose. Into the 1960s, national nuclear policy and the Lab’s mission were defined by the arms race of the Cold War.

Attitudes toward safety and security developed in this context and in the larger context of the times. People who had donned welders' goggles to watch nuclear explosions from, say, six miles out, felt their hazards—in the concussion in their chests and the shaking of firm ground under their feet—and knew that the knowledge of these weapons could not be shared widely and that the dangers in their material must be respected. Further, these weapons must never be used again. Deterrence, not use, was the only justification for constantly improving the designs.

But at the same time, the hazards of low levels of radiation were not fully understood. Doing experiments quickly was valued, and experimenting on oneself could be considered reasonable. Money and appreciation flowed to the people who had provided the means to end World War II, leading to some arrogance. Some scientists, like Richard Feynman, have a rebellious, playful, competitive streak. Feynman has written several books on the practical jokes he perpetrated on the security system in wartime *Los Alamos*.

By the 1960s, the nuclear arms race was at its peak, and the weapons laboratories were repositories of wide-ranging research. To develop nuclear weapons and understand their effects, many areas of chemistry, biology, earth sciences, and engineering are necessary. This expertise could be applied to many other areas, including energy development. *Los Alamos* ventured into two non-weapons programs, one to develop a gas-cooled reactor and the other to develop a nuclear rocket for a Mars mission. Both programs collapsed when funding was withdrawn in the mid-1970s, but today's gas-cooled reactors (mostly outside the US) use technology developed at *Los Alamos*, and nuclear rocket technology is being dusted off for the recently re-proposed Mars mission.

The collapse of these programs and the first-ever loss of jobs at the Lab shocked *Los Alamos* to the point that two men committed suicide. But like a genie, the idea of a more varied mission for the nuclear laboratories couldn't be forced back into its lamp. A project to develop geothermal energy was funded by the National Science Foundation, the first program from an agency other than the Atomic Energy Commission. Then there were projects on energy, and bioscience, and lasers, and Star Wars, and funding came from many, many sources, even industry. The national laboratories competed against each other for these programs.

These beginnings of the diversification of the Lab coincided with nuclear stalemate. By the end of the 1960s, it was clear that the United States and the Soviet Union possessed enough nuclear weapons to destroy the world many times over. Other means of dealing with their differences needed to be developed, and Henry Kissinger began the strategy of *détente*.

Nuclear weapons programs at the Lab continued to be generously funded, and other programs grew, without strategic direction. Since its inception, the Lab contained groups of technical and support personnel organized partly according to scientific discipline and partly according to assigned objectives. Each group reported to a group leader, who reported to a division leader who reported to the director or one of his deputies. While the nuclear weapons programs continued to interact closely as in the Manhattan Project, groups developing non-weapons programs found less common purpose and less need to work together.

The agencies funding work at the Lab wanted accountability for their funds. Through the 1960s and 1970s, little reporting was required of Lab scientists beyond reports and, where possible, open scientific publications. Financial reports for the overall budget went through one Lab office. As the programs diversified, reporting requirements grew.

The Atomic Energy Commission itself morphed into the Department of Energy, which contains a pastiche of regulatory and research agencies, along with the nuclear weapons complex. Congressional oversight bloomed from the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy to scores of Congressional committees with jurisdiction over parts of the Lab's programs.

Don Kerr, the Lab's fourth director, introduced matrix management, the theory of which is that one side of the matrix (divisions and groups) would be organized primarily by scientific and engineering disciplines, and the other side would manage the projects. The project managers would negotiate with the group leaders for personnel for their projects. The system nominally continues, but it has seldom worked according to theory.

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Classification and security have undergone changes, too, that contribute to the Lab's current problems. Shortly after the Soviet Union collapsed, there was a hugely optimistic belief that the end of history had arrived and nuclear weapons were no longer necessary. The optimism led, through Bill Clinton's Secretary of Energy, Hazel O'Leary, to enthusiastic declassification.

During the Manhattan Project, classification was easy: everything in the project was classified. Then and later, information on nuclear weapons was "born classified" in the Restricted Data category. During the Lab's orientation for new hires in the mid-1960s, Sam Glasstone, who had been a chemist in the Manhattan Project, drew one circle on the blackboard and another inside it. "Drawing concentric circles used to be classified," he joked. Fission bombs are designed in concentric circles. By the 1960s that knowledge was generally available.

Through the nineties, much, much more information on nuclear weapons was declassified. By the end of the nineties, the declassification rush had slowed down, and there were second thoughts. The Lab had engaged questions of terrorism since the 1970s and warned about the possibility of nuclear weapons in the hands of terrorist groups. These warnings were largely ignored at the national level; even at the Lab, it wasn't clear that this wasn't just one more funding ploy. After September 2001, reclassification began. Where once there had been a reasonably unified body of knowledge that remained classified, a crazy quilt of classified and declassified emerged.

A complex of laboratories that had had a single clearly-defined objective now focus much of their energies on selling many capabilities to many funders; within the laboratories, researchers vie with each other for funding. The current understanding of research itself emphasizes the importance of the individual investigators, who spend less and less of their time researching and more and more time on reporting finances, effort, and, oh yes, technical progress, along with developing proposals for when the latest one runs out. A clear line between classified and unclassified information no longer exists. The stage is set for trouble.

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On Letting Go

by Charles Miess

It doesn't bother you anymore to go out to your old home and pick up the kids. You can ignore the old familiar sights that a few months ago would weigh on your heart like a mound of wet cement. You can pass by the homes of friends from three years past and think of them as strangers—her friends now—people that you have never met. You have new companions and acquaintances and have finally accepted the fact that your life must go on.

The street where you used to live looks the same—yet, even from a distance, the old house is starting to look shabby. The paint that you so carefully applied some years back is peeling and faded. The tree house you built for the kids is seldom used anymore, and is more weather-worn than foot-worn. Hanging from a stout limb of the ancient maple nearby is the old swing with one chain broken, and that end of the seat is resting against the ground. There was a time when memories of “push me higher, Dad,” would have flooded into your mind. Now, it's just another old broken swing. You think of all the work it takes to keep a house from falling apart, and you're glad for your apartment in town. “All of this is her problem now—this is what she wanted,” you think with cold satisfaction. It doesn't bother you anymore; your life must go on.

As you pull into the driveway and stop by the house, your eyes are no longer pulled to the trees in the yard that you planted and pruned and nourished for so many years. Instead, you busy yourself clearing the car seats for six-year-old Jason. Jessica will not be with you today, as she has a date for the Homecoming Dance. She's a senior this year and recently got her driver's license. Andy, the oldest of the three, is in his third year at college and usually stays with his mother when he's home for the weekend.

You're still fussing with the inside of your car, when Jason comes bouncing out with his school backpack and a plastic bag filled with play clothes. “Hi Dad,” he says excitedly. He plants a wet kiss on your cheek, “I *missed* you, Dad!” he adds.

“I missed you even more, Dad,” Jessica hollers as she runs out of the house half dressed.

Andy walks up awkwardly and joins the group. “Hey Dad,” he says shyly, “how's it going?” He and Jessica fill you in on their activities since you last saw them. Their youthful faces have been rapidly assuming a grown up look between your visits. You used to feel sick in the pit of your stomach seeing their childhood slipping through your fingers. Now, you can look at it more philosophically. “That's what kids do,” you think to yourself, “they grow up. No big deal. Their life must go on too.”

Old Dusty swaggers over, wags his tail in recognition, and greets you with his mixed bark and howl. You can pat him gently on the head now—without remembering. Without remembering the time you risked your life to rescue him from the neighbor's ice encrusted pond, making a path through the soft ice with your fist as you swam. Your memory of holding his cold, exhausted body next to yours, the smell of his wet fur, and the helpless gratitude in his eyes is rapidly fading from your mind. He's not much more than just an old dog to you now. Your life must go

on.

The bride who stood by your side twenty-five years ago is now a stranger with graying hair strolling toward you. “Make sure Jason has a good supper and be *sure* to give him a bath before he comes home,” she says. You grunt acknowledgement without emotion. “Jessie will pick Jason up at your place this evening,” she continues.

Not counting an old fashioned department store, the wildlife refuge is Jason’s favorite place in the town where you now live. As you walk the trails, Jason stuffs his small warm hand into yours. “We should volunteer to work here,” Jason exclaims while he helps you pick up trash and broken glass from the path. “Dad, look what I found,” he adds with excitement as he digs up an old light bulb with drawn tip that looks to be of 1930’s vintage. “Let’s add this to your collection of bottles,” he says. As you walk along, your thoughts return to the home you left and the fields and woods that used to be so much a part of you. “Heck, the trees here are just as good, and I don’t have to pay taxes on this land,” you remind myself.

The day goes by quickly, and Jessica too-soon arrives to pick up Jason. For a moment you think it is someone else, when a beautiful young woman full of poise and confidence steps from her car. “Do you like my hair, Dad?” she asks with the uncertainty of a little girl hoping for her daddy’s approval. She pulls her navy blue dress from the car and proudly shows what she will wear to the dance that night. You hope someone will take a picture of her for you, because you won’t get to see her in it. “That’s the way it goes,” you think, your life must go on without them.

You watch her car until it disappears in the distance. Walking slowly back to your apartment, you feel strangely unfulfilled. You search for comfort in a book from your library shelf. Your eyes are drawn to a verse midway through a poem by Edgar Allen Poe; you stop to read.

*I stand amid the roar
Of a surf tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand,
Grains of the golden sand—
How few! yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep—while I weep!
Oh God! can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
Oh God! can I not save
One from the pitiless wave?
Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?*

It occurs to you that more than a thousand days have passed since you left home so abruptly. More than a thousand days, more than a thousand nights, and more than a thousand haunting dreams. Eleven hundred and forty-three to be exact. But life must go on.

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