
ARE YOU HAVING ANY FUN?

Take a break from today's credit headaches, and let Ed tell you how lenders used to be when "grim" wasn't the rule.

* * *

Dwight Eisenhower used to say that you should never take yourself too seriously, but always take your work very seriously. Some of you reading this may be Rotarians, as I am, and the new official Rotary line is to be sure to have some fun. That's hard sometimes, as bankers are supposed to be pretty straight-laced and, lenders in particular, are supposedly trained to lend money only to those who don't need it. And right now, everything is supposed to be grim.

I think back when it wasn't that way...

Days before e-mail, voicemail, and Internet

At The Bank of New York in the mid-sixties, I joined a group of about 25 men in the loan officer training program. It was not exactly hard work, though there were occasionally challenging assignments. Mostly, we were responding to the workload of the bank, such as answering credit inquiries; making inquiries on those customers who were undergoing a credit review by one of our officers; spreading borrowers' statements; and writing credit analyses and summaries. It was sometimes humdrum, though the experience was useful both to the bank and to us as future lenders.

The credit department had its permanent cadre of professional credit people. These were men and women who were likely to spend their entire careers in the credit department. They were the critical cogs in assuring the continuity of a strong credit culture from one generation to the next. There were clerical people, mostly women, who were performing important back-office tasks, but who had no long-term career ambitions at the bank. It was a pretty diverse working group for its day and most everyone got along very well.

And then there were us "hot shots," from supposedly the best schools with the best pedigrees. I was, as they say, "long on dog but short on pedigree," but I had a brand-new MBA from Columbia, so I figured I belonged in such a group.

My co-workers at the aspiring lending officer level were usually the sons of rich or prominent men. One was the son of the president of a first-rate non-Ivy-League school where the CEO of the bank had graduated some 35 years before; another the son of the trading partner at a large, Wall Street investment firm; the son of a society Philadelphia Main Line doctor whose family had large trust business with the bank; and so forth. You get the idea.

Easier going and good-natured ribbing

One distinguishing characteristic, as I think back, was the group's low threshold for boredom. We were always celebrating something or other and that called for a nice lunch, preceded by a martini (or two), a practice more common then than today. It didn't take much of an occasion to celebrate, and usually moving from credit inquiry to credit analysis was sufficient. Promotion out of the credit department was usually a big deal and, for that sort of occasion, the honoree didn't have to buy his own lunch.

These were the rituals and rites of passage, so to speak, and they were all observed with a certain panache and style.

John, a close friend of mine from those days (and to this), arrived for his first day of work in the credit department, and

was introduced to one of the permanent credit supervisors. The supervisor was a likeable enough fellow, but he had the strange habit of choosing nicknames for the people worked for him. John's "given" name was Guano. It was years before John figured out what that meant. I don't know which was funnier-the name or John's not figuring it out for almost two years.

All new credit investigators had to learn how to do investigations on names called into the credit department by lending officers and customers of the bank. We were required to order a Dun and Bradstreet report; call known creditors of the subject, conduct bank-to-bank checkings; and otherwise ascertain, to the best of our ability, the paying habits and credit integrity of the subject company.

It fell to me one day to carry out one of our initiations for newcomers. I had to create one of a series of dummy credit files on an entirely fictitious company. Then a hapless "newbie" would be assigned to investigate the account, while those around him in the department would feign a level of activity while he struggled with the inquiry. My offering to this effort was a company that as I recall made sound boards for electric synthesizers maximizing "harmonic dissonance" and other exotic quasi-musical terms. It was great fun and most everyone passed with flying colors while becoming red in the face at the moment.

The phones were always ringing in the credit department and this was well before voice mails and e-mails were workplace fixtures. That permitted considerable creativity in leaving callback messages. Mr. Wolfe or Mr. Behr called frequently, leaving for a callback number that of the Bronx Zoo.

I recall hearing many years ago that humor is best described as "the perception of the incongruous." Well, we were an incongruous lot of young people in those days.

I also think that bright people are among the funniest. They have quick wits and academic backgrounds that permit them to draw from a variety of disciplines and experiences. The Bank of New York had people like that and that's one of the reasons I enjoyed it so much. The humor and hi-jinks also built a level of camaraderie that I've not experienced in many other places since. Those experiences served us well as we cut our teeth on what were for most of us the first real jobs of our working careers.

Don't become a sad sack

By contrast, today's workplace is often mean spirited. Bullies abound in some of them. These bullies set the tones of acceptable behaviors in ways that the senior people don't necessarily intend, but seem powerless to control or influence. I hope that each of you who are in the early days of your career find experiences that blend the fun and the seriousness of work in proper proportions. Once most of us put our heads down to go to work right out of college, it's 30 years or more before we have a chance to look up and take the time to smell the flowers.

My advice on the many days now that I have the opportunity to smell the flowers is to find a balance between work and fun. You can make the work fun but you're well on your way to becoming a sad sack if the fun turns out to be work. How fortunate I consider myself to have been to have found interesting, productive, and useful work with colleagues, co-workers, and customers, who valued each other for who we were and how well we did our jobs. And we laughed a lot.

Who says that work can't be fun?

- About Ed O'Leary:

Veteran lender and workout expert O'Leary spent more than 40 years in bank commercial credit and related functions, working with both major banks as well as community banking institutions. He earned his workout spurs in the dark days of the 1980s and early 1990s in both oil patch and commercial real estate lending.

O'Leary began his banking career at The Bank of New York in 1964, and worked at banks in Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. He served as a faculty member and thesis advisor at ABA's Stonier Graduate School of Banking for more than two decades, and served as long as a faculty member for ABA's undergraduate and graduate commercial lending schools.

Today he works as a consultant and expert witness, and serves as instructor for ABA e-learning courses and a frequent speaker in ABA's Bank Director Telephone Briefing series. You can hear interviews with Ed about workouts here. You can e-mail him at etoleary@att.net. O'Leary's website can be found at www.etoleary.com.

Order Ed O'Leary's two-hour "Improving Your Bank's Workout Function" CD