

The Honey Pot by Elaine Camper

A number of years ago, Pacific Power and Light (PP&L), which serves many customers in the Cascade Mountains, was faced with solving an on-going problem that resulted in both an undesirable and unsafe job situation for the PP&L linemen.

In the Pacific Northwest, there are a number of ice storms in the fall and spring. These storms result in the accumulation of a significant ice load accumulating on the power transmission lines. If not removed, this ice will accumulate to the point that the lines will be over-stressed and break. The method used to remove the ice was to send linemen out into the field, have them climb the icy poles and towers and shake the lines with long poles hooked at one end. The linemen hated this job because it meant they would have to go into the woods, climb poles and towers, and shake the lines under extremely unpleasant conditions. A number of them were hurt when they fell from the icy poles and towers.

PP&L had, in the past, conducted a number of "brainstorming" sessions with no positive results. They then turned to a professional resource to organize still another session. He suggested that a diverse group be assembled to look at this problem. Rather than assembling just linemen and their supervisors, the resource insisted that people with a large variety of job functions be convened to look for a more creative way to get the ice off the power lines. In the "brainstorming" session that followed, were linemen, supervisors, accountants, secretaries, and people from the mail room.

Several hours into the meeting the professional resource was beginning to become concerned that this effort would be as unproductive as previous ones. Then, during one of the coffee breaks, he overheard two of the linemen talking.

"I hope we can finally figure out a better way to skin this cat," said one. "I really hate this job. Why, just last week, I was coming down from a pole, and, when I hit the ground, I was looking eye to eye at one of the biggest, meanest black bears I've ever seen. That bear, apparently, was not happy that I had invaded his territory, and chased me for well over a mile before he was satisfied that I would not return."

Trying to stimulate the group, the resource retold this tale to the rest of the session. "Why don't we train the bears to climb the poles. They are so big and so heavy that their weight would probably be enough to shake the wires and knock the ice off," quipped one of the linemen.

After the laughter died down, the group thought of hundreds of reasons why that was a silly idea (some of the comments referred to the character or parentage of the person suggesting the idea, and will not be repeated here).

Then another of the linemen suggested that although training the bears seemed foolish, perhaps by placing honey pots on top of the poles, the bears would naturally climb the poles to get the honey and, in the process, shake the poles sufficiently to knock the ice off the lines.

After another period of laughter followed by more objections generally centered around the fact that the bears might choose to empty the honey pots in fair not foul weather, one of the more senior, more sarcastic linemen said, "You know all those fancy helicopters those fat cats in the front office fly around in all the time? Why don't we grab one of those and fly from pole to pole placing the honey pots on top just after an ice storm. That way the honey will be there when we need it, and, besides, it will do those fat executives some good to walk for a change."

Still another period of laughter followed. Then one of the secretaries spoke for the first time. "I was a nurse's aide in Vietnam. I saw many injured soldiers arrive at the field hospital by helicopter. The down wash from the helicopter blades was amazing. Dust would fly everywhere. It was almost blinding. I wonder if we just flew the helicopter over the power lines at low altitude, would the down wash from those blades be sufficient to shake the lines and knock the ice off?"

This time there was no laughter - just silence. She had come up with an answer. By valuing diversity and by encouraging divergent thinking, the resource had enabled the group to come up with a possible solution to a problem all wanted solved.

By the way, ever since that meeting, PP&L uses helicopters to fly over the power transmission lines after ice storms. It works beautifully. Linemen are no longer required to climb up ice covered poles to shake the lines. The brainstorming session was a success. But remember, if they hadn't found the bear, they may never have found the helicopter.