

GENERAL ELECTRIC Review

SEPTEMBER 1958

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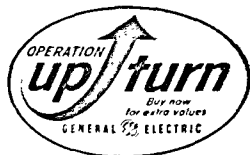
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Emphasis on EXTRA VALUES is an important feature of General Electric's campaign for a business upturn in 1958. Extra values contributed by comprehensive and balanced research and engineering programs are important constituents of General Electric products.

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COVER

The rapidly expanding population of the United States will place a greater burden on already strained transportation facilities. But farsighted planning will introduce more than adequate measures, through more efficient interdependence of travel systems. When the umpire yells, "Play ball!" in the 1970 World Series, more people from farther away will watch the game, rain or shine, with no traffic tie-ups to dampen their enjoyment. From downtown business section to modern airport, from civic and shopping centers to your home, travel time will be measured in minutes. For a look at Metropolitan U.S.A.—1970, turn to the article that begins on page 22.

Need for Nonconformists

For some time certain circles have bemoaned the loss of modern man's individuality under the press of group conformity. Recently the subject has received searching analysis. Basic factors now are better understood, and some say the tide may be turning.

The *Christian Science Monitor*, for example, has editorially heralded "the rebirth of 'the individual' as a national type." In a lighter vein, a prescient magazine cartoonist wrote the caption: "Why can't you be a nonconformist like everybody else?" Popular magazine articles, businessmen's speeches, and current reassessments of educational methods and goals evidence a growing counteroffensive for individualism. Because conformity pressures are particularly distressing and inhibiting to engineers and scientists, it is essential that all implications of the subject be understood.

In the sense in which the word "conformity" is used by today's social critics, it means the blind, uncritical acceptance of beliefs and choices in the absence of conviction based on evidence and logical grounds. With that definition in mind, a distinction arises between conformity of action and conformity in thinking.

Conformity of action, as expressed by social habits and customs, is essential. Society could hardly struggle through a day if there were not a high degree of conformity to the laws of the land, established business practices, and acceptable manners in personal relations.

But rigid intellectual conformity—without conviction—has no saving graces. It implies suppression of dissent and abdication of moral responsibility. It negates personal freedom and forms the antithesis of personal integrity.

Such conformity in some cases has been nurtured unwittingly by the stress laid upon harmony and agreement in group approaches to technological (as well as other) problems. On this score a great deal has been said about teamwork.

The advantages of the team-group approach to technological problems are well known. As Clarence H. Linder, General Electric Vice President—Engineering, said recently, "It is quite unrealistic to expect individual talent, however great, to encompass the range of disciplines which must be brought to bear on the engineering problems that are really vital to progress . . . we must agree that organized, cooperative effort, from a wide spectrum of human ability, is a requirement that is here to stay."

In any team effort, however, it is important that certain cautions be recognized . . .

- Group harmony and agreement should never become the end sought by a "team" of engineers or scientists. For when they become an end, subtle pressures arise to curb dissent and enforce conformity

- The group is not necessarily always right. The history of science contains many examples of instances in which

the "best thinking" of many experts was proved wrong by a dissenting individual.

Furthermore, it should be recognized that intellectual conformity—as defined—does not contribute to group effectiveness; it impedes it, because it . . .

- Causes group agreement to be overvalued
- Promotes a tendency to disclaim error in one's thinking when that thinking reflects the group consensus
- Induces inertia, inhibitions, and inflexibility
- Invites participants to express opinions other than their private opinions
- Destroys the validity of group consensus.

The willingness of an individual to accept group values uncritically is sometimes considered evidence of his loyalty. But a close examination shatters that illusion. If there is a fair means of measuring loyalty, it surely must be in terms of a person's willingness to fight and, if necessary, sacrifice for the advancement of his organization. In those terms, dissenters are not necessarily disloyal.

The significance of these points has not escaped the attention of thoughtful business leaders. One such leader, Robert Paxton—General Electric President—stated recently that . . . "industry does not prize men who lack values and principles of their own and who seek to please by uncritical acceptance of beliefs and choices." (The full text of Mr. Paxton's address—presented at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's 1958 commencement—appears on page 38.)

Asserting that a company needs creative self-reliant people if it is to prove capable of adapting successfully to changing technological and economic conditions, he added, "At General Electric, we have never doubted that encouraging men to think independently and to stand up for their convictions is essential to our Company's progress. . . . In fact, our decentralization policy may be taken as evidence of our confidence that large numbers of employees possess or can develop those qualities of initiative and leadership required at all levels and locations of the Company."

Mr. Paxton also called attention to broader implications of independent thinking: "An appreciation of the need for competition of ideas, tolerance of dissent, and unquestioned freedom of opinion safeguard the preservation of a free way of life."

What can you do to further intellectual progress? Mr. Linder offers this advice: "Cultivate the urge to know, and beware of waiting to be told. The man who waits to be told becomes overly dependent on others. And after all, what is dependence on others in the matters of the mind but conformity?"

Paul R. Heinmiller

EDITOR