

# Brown Bricks

*Often it's an individual rather than "the system" that holds back progress*

**By Richard MacLean**

Robert Shelton coined the term "green wall" to describe corporate cultures that exclude environmental management from key decision making processes. Yes, "the system" can be a major barrier, but frequently an even greater obstacle is a single individual in the management hierarchy. Who are these "brown bricks" and how do you deal with them?

Dealing with difficult people in government and industry is nothing new. It is the stuff of Dilbert cartoons. It affects all professions at all levels and seems to occupy more of one's time the higher up you go in the organization. It is no cakewalk even at the top; while they have the power to fire nearly everyone inside the company, they still have to deal with the thorny ones outside. I recall witnessing one CEO in a company I worked for jumping up and down like a spoiled kid whining "No one ever listens to me!"

In my own career working inside industry, I felt it was part of the job to build consensus and gain support of most of the people most of the time. This takes a lot of energy; probably 50 percent of a typical manager's time is spent on office politics. It is impossible to satisfy everyone and a thick skin helps.

For example, back in my days with General Electric (GE) I organized the annual corporate environmental meetings. These were wildly successful events and I still run into individuals who remind me of the "golden years" of these popular gatherings of the GE environmental clan. In spite of this, one attendee would report year after year that these non-mandatory events were absolute rubbish — a total waste of time. The first year it really bothered me, but five meetings later, I realized he loved the meetings almost as much as he loved to complain about them.

## **Brown Bricks**

Brown bricks in the management hierarchy are a different matter: they have the power to directly affect your career. They sign off on your budget. They have greater (and sometimes exclusive) access to "the powers that be." They can make your life miserable and frustrate the forward progress of a program or project that is the most needed, beneficial project imaginable.

They stifle communication up and down the organization. They rarely give new ideas the light of day, and problems are so muted that they lose all sense of urgency and significance, if they are conveyed up through the organization at all. Directives from above, no matter how inane or ill informed, are carried out without resistance or objection. Mentoring opportunities from these individuals are limited to how to survive office politics or how to give a great presentation based on a molecular layer of

knowledge. They excel at both. They rarely provide defensive air cover; indeed, they may act as behind the scenes cheerleaders to deflect blame on anyone but himself or herself. In short, they are a mega migraine.

Brown bricks are typically found one or two layers above the individuals upon whom they inflict their stifling effects. The higher your career takes you in a company or agency, the greater the likelihood that you will run into these individuals. Generally they are not a problem within small companies, small local agencies or at manufacturing facilities. Yes, they may be present, but access to the decision makers is much less constrained and there is more accountability and transparency. Top management knows everyone, and if they keep these people around, it is because of personal relationships or other extenuating circumstances.

Brown bricks are often senior staff individuals who have been with the company or agency for a long time and have reached their highest level of incompetence and ineffectiveness. So why are they placed and kept in these positions? Although some may joke that they must have videotapes of executives in compromising positions or know where the skeletons are buried, they are generally regarded as loyal employees who earlier in their careers may have made positive contributions.

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Although they are always recognized as dead ended, from management's perspective they certainly are capable of maintaining a "non-strategic, non-core service function." This narrow view of the environmental department is characteristic of companies that also have well-entrenched green walls. A green wall is a key ingredient to the longevity of brown bricks.

#### **How Prevalent are Brown Bricks?**

In my 25 years working within industry, I only had one boss who met all the characteristics (see **Sidebar**). His boss, who also had many of these same characteristics, compounded my five years of frustration.

Whenever I was able to work directly with a senior vice-president of the business group, it was pure pleasure — action and decisions were made. Oh, but to get through the brown bricks!

One brick in 25 years? Get over it, MacLean! I'm over it, but I wish the same could be said for many of my colleagues today who routinely express their frustration. Are there more today than a decade ago? I cannot say for certain, but there is anecdotal evidence that there may be. The conditions that foster such problems may have increased over the past five years. For

example, (1) senior environmental managers retiring and being replaced by senior staff managers from other functional areas; (2) environmental health and safety (EHS) functions shifted to be more closely aligned with service staffs; (3) business management more comfortable with the mature EHS programs; and (4) emphasis on articulate spokespersons who project the image of corporate social responsibility but lack in depth experience in EHS issues.

These are the danger signs. I would be interested in receiving reader's views on whether or not they detect a trend.

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### Brick Busting

Do not confuse the all too common inept manager with a brown brick. Inexperienced or unskilled managers, who may have difficulty pushing progress themselves but are willing to open doors for others, are not brown bricks. The same is true for bosses with horrific personalities and misguided managerial skills. They often have strong agendas driven by their desire for success and promotion. They want to make things happen, especially with their careers. If you are useful to his or her agenda, you can actually make things happen.

If you can put up with the abuse and ineptness, and believe in the manager's direction (or the direction in which he/she can be maneuvered), you may, at least, have the satisfaction of seeing results. Knowing

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how to "manage your manager" is the secret of success and, not surprisingly, there are books on this subject. If their form of progress is something you want no part of, you have the options of transferring, finding another job or suffering under the hopes that they retire soon or that their agenda and management style prompts upper management to either fire or promote them. It can be a long wait.

On the other hand, it can be pleasant to work under a brown brick, providing of course, that you are willing to forgo progress and are not overly paranoid that you will be the one receiving the blame if something should go seriously wrong. Taking them on directly or blatantly going around them to force forward progress is particularly risky, more so than taking on an inept manager, since they are masters of office politics and are often well connected to upper management.

What works? Many of the same techniques used to deal with bad managers will help, of course. My colleagues and I have found that appealing to their sense of security is paramount. If they feel that they must take action to avoid a major blowup, generally they will opt for a course of action that will avoid imminent issues (as defined on a timescale often related to their retirement or next transfer). It must be urgent, because the tendency is to sit on issues rather than pass on any bad news that may disturb upper management and the natural order of things.

Getting critical information up to those that can both appreciate and understand its significance is essential to making progress. "Brick busting" is facilitated by structuring forums to flow information around a brown brick. For example, clients have had me conduct internal management system audits to construct a communications vehicle in which upper management would become aware of the issues and recommended corrective action plans that were being blocked by the brick.

Independent consultants help elevate key issues, not only because he or she is viewed as the credible outside expert, but because their written or verbal reports reach beyond the usual linear confines of the management hierarchy. It also places the individual who initiates the review in relative safety, since they are not the ones describing the issues or bringing the messages forward.

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## The Awful Truth

So much of what is written today about environmental progress is happy face drivel: sustainable development at an ever-accelerating pace of social responsibility! The awful truth is that progress within many companies and local, state and federal agencies is painfully slow. Far too many courageous and dedicated EHS professionals struggle just to keep their heads above the (waste) water. Brown bricks just add to the frustration.

**Brick busting can be facilitated by structuring forums to flow information around a brown brick.**

To be sure, this has been a harsh assessment and one that probably does not reflect the working conditions of the majority of *Environmental Protection* magazine readers. Unfortunately, I suspect that most readers do know of colleagues who struggle with both green walls and brown bricks. Environmental activists and non-government organizations (NGOs) point incessantly to the failure of industry and government to protect the environment; when was the last

time they gave credit to the individuals on the front lines within these organizations? It is to these individuals that this article is directed. Thanking you for not giving up and keeping up the pressure for progress! **EP**

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## Characteristics of Brown Bricks

### ***Traits they have***

- Survival skills; politically astute
- Very articulate
- Mirror general management's point of view
- Upwardly smooth and charming, non-confrontational
- Considered by management to be safe and trustworthy
- Fit with corporate culture

### ***Traits they often lack***

- Ability to drive results; procrastinator — unable to make independent decisions
- Personal conviction; "Round healed" — can turn on a dime and switch allegiances
- Courage, sometimes masked by intimidation and bluster
- Respect from the individuals they supervise or attempt to influence
- Strategic, original or visionary thinking
- In-depth background in environmental, health and safety
- Entrepreneurial skills

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