

The Brightest Bulb: A Fable for the Bright Ones
By Ernie Whiteside

Once upon a time ... all good fables start that way ... there was a large office. The large room had many desks and many light sockets. The manager of the office decided to fill every light socket with a 60W bulb. The 60W bulbs were an efficient compromise, not too bright, not too dull and very economical in both cost per bulb and cost of electric consumption.

Occasionally workers complained that there just wasn't enough light but the problem wasn't bad enough to get upset or replace the bulbs. A new manager observed that there was only a small difference between the light produced by a 60W bulb and a 45W bulb and after doing some math realized that they could periodically replace 60W bulbs with 45W bulbs without any significant reduction in light and that they would realize significant cost savings. So he ordered a case of 45W bulbs and systematically began replacing bulbs.

Nobody really noticed the replacement but complaints by the workers of poor lighting began to increase so another manager decided to purchase a case of 75W bulbs and began his own systematic replacement, which resulted in fewer complaints of bad lighting.

One worker got tired of the poor lighting and went down town and bought a couple boxes of 100W bulbs and stayed late one night and replaced a number of the old bulbs with 100W bulbs. Most of the workers new this was against the rules but agreed to say nothing because the new bulbs made lighting better and didn't stand out too much from the 60W and 75W bulbs, but they did make the 45W bulbs a bit more obvious. Even the managers had to admit that the new 100W bulbs improved the lighting, so they didn't say anything either.

Nobody knows how it happened, but one day the workers came in and someone had put a 120W bulb in one of the sockets. It was immediately obvious that a few desks had much better lighting than the rest. They tried to ignore the bulb but soon workers were complaining to management that other workers had better lighting and this was unfair. That 120W bulb was beginning to cause some serious problems!

The managers got together to figure out how to solve the problem. The first manager wanted to replace all of the bulbs with standard 60W bulbs, but everyone knew that would reduce the overall lighting to significantly. Another manager suggested that the 45W bulbs be discarded in favor of higher wattage bulbs, but the accounting department had already mandated the 45W bulbs for cost savings.

The 75W bulbs had been properly authorized and removing them wouldn't do. Finally, it was decided that all unauthorized bulbs would be removed and replaced with standard 60W bulbs. Secretly everyone agreed that they would allow the 100W bulbs back into the mix after tensions had gone down but the 120W bulb would never be used again.

It just doesn't pay to be the brightest bulb!

© Ernest A. Whiteside, August 23, 2005. All right reserved. Permission is granted to reproduce electronically or otherwise for personal use and/or to share with others so long as article is published in its entirety and properly attributed. May not be reproduced for profit without the author's permission.

Word count: 513