

Challenge: A valued employee of a large multinational company was retiring due to health complications and was not expected to live very long. Although no one in the company knew this, the chief executive wanted to craft a loving tribute to the retiree at a gathering of all of the managerial staff from around the world.

Good evening. I won't say it in all your native languages, as I typically do, since I've read the personnel sheets and realize how many languages that would have to be. Besides, everyone knows Americans only speak one language ... although some of our British colleagues would seriously debate that.

Of course, in the States, we are changing the English language to be what we call "politically correct." For example, people who steal from stores during riots are no longer looters. We now refer to them as "unorthodox shoppers."

I am greatly honored to be here to address you on this very auspicious occasion. But, as you can imagine, good honor is not all I feel. I am equally humbled. And I know there is a figurative trap door directly beneath my feet ... and that each of you has a mental button with which to spring it at any second if I should say the wrong word.

And I was forewarned. Several weeks ago, while making a routine tour of the food service kitchen we have at Van den Bergh headquarters in Lisle, Illinois, I encountered a woman associate. Her face was covered with Bakersource Mix. She had the latest hairdo, frizzed out to here. She had high fashion, long purple fingernails, silver lipstick orange shine-in-the-dark eyeliner, and extended eye lashes. I thought she was from our personal products division, an Elizabeth Arden model, perhaps.

I should have been alerted by the long pointed hat and the fact that she was stirring a boiling caldron sprinkling in ground lizard. As I approached, she shrieked, "Beware the Ides of March!"

"Ides"? I thought she had a Cockney accent and was referring to something really sinister.

How did I know she was playing the nightmarish soothsayer out of Shakespear's Julius Caesar? As my margarine colleagues who attended last year's International Association Meeting will attest, you don't get much exposure to Shakespeare at Disney World. We are much more apt to recognize Minnie, Mickey and Goofy than Macbeth, Macduff and Goneril. So I didn't associate The Ides of March with this particular evening, March 15th.

But what do I have to fear? I have nothing in common with Julius Caesar. In fact, tonight I come more in the role of Marc Antony ... I come to bury ... I mean to retire XXXX, not to praise him.

To further paraphrase the bard, "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones." So let it be with XXXX. I won't risk boring everyone with the talk of good or evil. It's not that I love XXXX less, but that I love my job more.

But as I said, I come to retire XXXX, not to praise him. Although I will share with you my first encounter with his formidable intellect.

Seven years, 11 months, 15 days, 7 hours and, uh, uh, some 20 minutes ago, more or less, I was taking care of a processing operation in Brazil which **** bought, not because his company wanted it, but because it came with several operations his company did want. So we were about to be sold.

Because of the peculiar market circumstances in Brazil, and because – unknown to **** – I had decided they were perhaps worthy of my talents, I argued that selling the business would not be too clever.

My presentation was in the standard **** format, complete with flip chart and marking pen. Voltaire said, "To hold a pen is to be at war." But, as an American, what did I know of Voltaire?

I had presented to successively higher levels of **** management who had visited us in Brazil. Ultimately, XXXX himself, apparently unconvinced by those I had convinced, came to visit.

My immediate superior and many of my associates tried to coach me on the do's and don't's of surviving a meeting with the Chairman, and told of the dire consequences of challenging XXXX' opinion. But strictly speaking, XXXX doesn't arrive with a fixed set of opinions, but with an open mind. Just watch your fingers and toes when that mind finds the truth and snaps shut on you like a steel trap.

As the presentation progressed, he began to ask more and more detailed questions and to listen, listen and listen. Thought I don't come to praise XXXX, many have said one of his most distinguishing characteristics in his capacity to painstakingly examine the minute details of each small part of each local business operation. To peel the onion, so to speak, and then view the inner matter from a global perspective. That's what he was doing while I was presenting.