

## THE CHURCH HILL TUNNEL

By Judy Hissong, CLM  
President, Nesso Strategies

So, how are you getting through? I pondered this question a lot lately as I continue to hear about all the difficult times throughout the country. I know there is much concern about our current state of affairs, in our country, in our community, and in our own homes. I wanted to write something to inspire each of you to overcome the obstacles you are facing and then I thought about the Church Hill Tunnel.

In the sleepy southern town of Richmond, Virginia there is a reasonably famous landmark called the Church Hill Tunnel. It was built in approximately 1870 for the astronomical price of \$1.2 million dollars (can you even imagine what that would cost today?). The Chesapeake and Ohio Railway (C&O) was the current railroad giant in the area who wanted to extend his tracks from the downtown Richmond terminal to the peninsula at Newport News, and Hampton Roads, Va.



*The Church Hill Tunnel, Photos courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society*

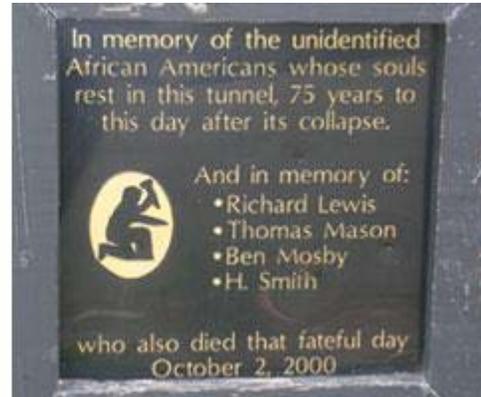
It was 4,000 feet long, the longest tunnel in the world at that time. It was an enormous undertaking because the soil in Richmond was unlike the typical bedrock the railroad was used to laying tracks on. The soil is actually clay that shrinks and swells with the rainfall and the groundwater. Oh sure, they could have gone around the area, adding many more miles of track, adding many more minutes of travel for each train, adding many more dollars of expense to their runs. There were many cave-ins during construction, but that didn't stop the railroad from pushing through...from getting through.

The tunnel was a wonderful solution for the railroad, even with the lives lost in the construction phase. The trains ran through the Church Hill tunnel for almost 20 years before C&O acquired a competitor (Richmond and Allegheny Railroad, R&A) and then chose a new route for the trains.

You see, R&A had already done the work to create a "water level" route along the James River which avoided the troublesome Church Hill Tunnel, the blue marl clay, and yet had a direct route to the peninsula. C&O constructed a three mile elevated track along a viaduct to complete the connection between the two company lines. This new route was opened in 1905 and brought the traffic through the Rivanna Trestle viaduct, which is the longest in the United States and still in use today.

In 1925, after 20 years of no use at all, the railroad found itself at a, uh-hem, crossroad (pun intended). It needed more tracks to do more business, and restoring the tunnel seemed the necessary solution to get more business done. It was on October 2, 1925 when a work train went into the tunnel to be a boost for the workers to reach the top of the tunnel (see *the middle picture above*) when the tunnel collapsed. Several men lost their lives and the locomotive remains sealed inside the tunnel, which remains sealed today.

This story gets longer. Many attempts were made to open the tunnel, bring out the locomotive, recover the bodies, etc. Many more cave-ins and tragedies resulted. As recently as 2006, a television station was revisiting the idea of opening the tunnel as a reality series to explore the engine that is entombed. At this point, there isn't a way to safely access the space, and I can only guess there will be more attempts in the future.



*The Sealed Church Hill Tunnel, Photos courtesy of the Virginia Historical Society*

So, as you read this, do you find yourself asking 'why'? Why do they persist to have a tunnel when there is clearly not a cooperating earth in that space? And so I ask you, "Why?" Why do we insist on pushing through with initiatives and job classifications when there isn't earth to support them?

Where is your Church Hill Tunnel being dug right now? What job description is being reviewed, revised, or revamped to accommodate "the need for another track" aka the current economy? What policy is being altered to cut a 4,000 foot tunnel instead of a 3 mile path - and what will be the damage that results?

In our current climate, we are focused on doing more with less. We are focused with our heads down and our shovels in hand. We are digging our tunnel to get through. What happens if we look up? Do you see the daylight at the end? Or, is your tunnel blue marl clay shrinking and swelling with the water level (profits of your firm)?

Now is the time for strategic focus. Now, more than any other time, is the right time to have your partners looking at the future, planning for the future, and looking up as they 'get through'. Here are some questions to answer for your firm's Tunnel:

- Do we have a receivables policy and program in place?
- Do we have standardized intake procedures including credit and conflict checks?
- Do we have the right people in the right jobs to maximize productivity?
- What is one thing each person in ownership can do to generate more profitability?

This is a small list. Bring one of these questions to your next management meeting and open it for discussion. See what creativity comes up. And, whatever you do, avoid using any negative words during the

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conversation. Turn any 'no's' into 'yes...and'. There aren't many managers looking up right now, so the time is perfect for your leadership skills to shine!

For more information and further reading on Strategic Planning, visit our [online library](#).



### **JUDY HISSONG, CLM**

President, Nesso Strategies | Founder, Legal Leadership Institute

Judy understands teams. And she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, finance, and legal management to help law firms improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

Bachelor's Degrees in Accounting and Physical Education | Master's Degree in Sports Management | Former Professional Athlete | Licensed Provider of Emotional Intelligence Tools | Certified Living Your Vision Facilitator | ALA Certified Legal Manager | ACE Certified Personal Trainer | ICF Professional Certified Coach

#### **CONNECT WITH JUDY**

619.546.7885 | [judy@nessostrategies.com](mailto:judy@nessostrategies.com) | [nessostrategies.com](http://nessostrategies.com) | [legalleadershipinstitute.com](http://legalleadershipinstitute.com)



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