

Published May 22, 1995

Whitlock plans to make most of Honda experience

Scott N. Whitlock

Born: Aug. 22, 1942

High School: West Senior High School, Aurora, Ill.

College: Denison University, Harvard Law School
Childhood heroes: parents, mother was a lawyer, father was a manufacturer

First jobs: selling men's clothing, working in a factory making desks

Professional mentors: senior partners at the law firm of Vorys, Sater, Seymour & Pease, in particular Richard G. Ison

Best advice: From high school debate coach, "Debates are won in the library."

Toughest lesson I ever had to learn: "To go to the library early and often."

By MARK WILLIAMS

Daily Reporter Staff Writer

Honda of America Manufacturing was in a bind. Bob Watson, the company's senior vice president and manager of the plant in Marysville and Honda's most senior American official at the time, had died.

Scott N. Whitlock, a lawyer with the law firm Vorys, Sater, Seymour & Pease, had gotten to know Watson and the projects he was involved in at Honda because a substantial part of his practice was devoted to doing work for Honda.

In fact, he and Watson would meet at 5:30 some mornings to discuss Honda projects, including expansion of the Marysville plant and development of an engine plant at Anna.

After Watson's death in 1984, he approached Honda officials with an idea. He could take a 90-day sabbatical from the law firm, 90 days in which he could take over for Watson, keep projects going and make the transition smoother until a successor was chosen.

Besides helping Honda, Whitlock said it would help him become a better lawyer.

"Seeing the manufacturer's organization from the client's perspective would be helpful," Whitlock said.

When day 85 in the sabbatical came, and no progress was made in getting a successor hired, he was asked if he would stay on.

After discussing the idea with other lawyers at the firm, where he had worked since he left law school in 1967, he accepted.

That began what turned out to be a more than 10-year relationship with Honda, something Whitlock said he never expected would last so long. Just a few weeks ago, Whitlock left Honda to return to his law practice at Vorys.

He spent five years as senior vice president and manager of the Marysville plant and became executive

X2409/2

vice president in January 1990. He was Honda's most senior American official.

It was not easy taking the job at Honda.

"It was tough because I loved the practice of law. I found I also loved the work at Honda," he said.

It also was tough because of his relationship with Watson.

"I always felt very close to Bob," and even sat in Watson's chair, Whitlock said.

"It was a great opportunity," he said.

Making the transition from lawyer to plant manager was based on asking questions of those associates in the production process, he said. Lawyers are trained what questions to ask and learn what they need from the answers they get, he said.

"Those are the people who are the experts on the spot, making the contribution and driving the business forward," he said.

Being a plant manager means not so much giving direction to the day-to-day operations, but helping establish a vision and then working to achieve that vision, he said.

Knowing the law also helps translate a lawyer's advice into making the decisions that have to be made for the business, he said.

After more than 10 years with Honda, he said it seemed to be a good time to leave. He had been through a period of great expansion with the company followed by an economic downturn and the recovery, he said.

"That is a relatively long time to be in that position."

Now that he has returned to Vorys, he said he hopes the experience in manufacturing will make him a better lawyer.

"I loved both careers," he said.

The third career will involving bring law and manufacturing together as an advocate of manufacturing, "which is terribly important to this state," he said.

The unique experience with Honda provided insight into the interplay of law, public policy and manufacturing, he said.

Manufacturing makes up 28 percent of the state's gross domestic product and Ohio is recognized as one of the leading manufacturing states in the country, said Whitlock who has served on the Ohio Manufacturers Association board for 10 years, the last two as chairman.

"For us, (manufacturing) is the driving force for the Ohio economy," he said.

x2404/3

Ohio often is regarded as a rustbelt state where factories have rusted away. Manufacturing, however, continues to grow, including companies such as Honda and other companies that provide auto parts, he said.

"Honda has had something to do with the renaissance of manufacturing in Ohio," he said. It has been an "extremely visible and positive success story."