

Cataclysmic events have a way of changing lots of things, from everyday human behaviors to big-time government control to the juicy stories people tell each other, now and later! When those events move beyond a provincial locality to a global scale, well then, those things are amplified all the more. You know, like the 20th Century, with two ferocious world wars and the Great Depression that devastated many nations. And there was the flu epidemic in 1918-1919 that took about 50 million lives worldwide. Then, a century later, the COVID pandemic. No adult alive and kicking during such events ever loses some vivid lessons and memories associated with newfound stresses that accompany such impactful events.

Some of that kind of dramatic change naturally invites the inventing or adopting of new language that distinguishes new events from past ones, you know, like the word “COVID.” And, along the way, previously little-used words start rolling off the tongues of newscasters and coffee shop patrons, words like “pandemic” and—in the case of the COVID pandemic—how about the phrase “supply chain”?

Yes indeed, supply chain is in headlines seemingly everywhere, aggressively moving out of relatively obscure meetings in factories to folks like a high school student saying, “Our family hasn’t gotten the furniture we ordered six months ago because of supply chain problems!” Look in every nook and cranny... Major newscasts showing video footage of scores of ships loaded with containers languishing for weeks in coastal harbors shout “supply chain.” Full shelves of everyday goods like toilet paper suddenly empty. Startling reports of worldwide computer chip shortages that are trumpeted as reducing availability and increasing prices of cars. Pervasive headlines and TV reports saturated with the words “supply chain.” So, let’s start with a definition: a supply chain is a network of people and organizations and their activities involved in providing a product or service to a consumer. That’s it! But, beyond that definition—supply chain is a pervasive reality that’s enjoyed every day by every person in every consumer-saturated society.

Just how is it that a shopper in the 21st century came to expect to easily pick up a whole host of unrelated goods, say, a bicycle, hair gel, a jar of pickles, adhesive tape, batteries, cinnamon, and fresh table cream, and all that in one stop? And think of this extravagance—that shopper expects to do that at pretty much anytime, 24/7, in any major superstore in America! Then he easily fills a completely different wish-list tomorrow at a different store! And then he fills yet a different wish-list the next day from a website with millions of items available! And remember, all this happens expecting that every item is available based upon the consumer’s whims and wishes, who actually assumes and casually expects the immediate fulfillment in the store or the customized delivery to a particular doorstep in a couple of days!

But think for a minute! What an intricate path that each and every one of those items purchased went through, a path that was orchestrated by many companies and people. Imagine the route of every bicycle part, from spokes to tires to sprockets, beginning with raw materials found in nature being processed into tire rims and nuts and tires and all the rest. Then the gathering of those parts to a factory for the assembly of the bike. Then there’s the storing and then the transporting from the factory to giant distribution centers using an intricate combination of transportation options, possibly including ships and trains and trucks and forklifts and four-wheeled carts in a retail store. All this is done by people in many roles in various companies. And a consumer expects this to be done and ready on the very day he decides to buy his daughter a bike for her birthday. Mind you now, he hasn’t bought a bike for many years, but that doesn’t change his expectations one little bit: he merely goes to Target or Walmart or a website he’s never visited before to get that bike exactly when and where he wants it!

And that’s just the bike! What about the pickles, the cinnamon, the adhesive tape? Of course, every consumable is expected to be there to meet his needs! Hey, we’re a long way from the 1800s in the U.S., where a farmer might buy a shovel or a bolt of cloth at a tiny general merchandise store—those were often purchases not focused on a right-now consumable product, but items to be used to, say, dig a hole or make a garment. Indeed, the history is that consumers expected to themselves do the necessary last step—as the active end-point of the supply chain, bearing the burden and effort to then make a garment.

Indeed, when a consumer so desires, the supply chain for food has reached an amazing stage. Used to be that a family wanting dinner was limited to getting mozzarella cheese, flour, and pepperoni slices at the grocery store, or better yet, having those supplies delivered to their house to make pizza. But now, they can routinely expect that those ingredients be expertly concocted into a fully-ready-to-consume, already-sliced, piping-hot pepperoni pizza delivered to their front door in thirty minutes! And that doesn't include the side order of chicken wings, where the supply chain started with henhouses full of eggs ready to be hatched. Well, actually, that all started with roosters and hens before that! After all, as the old saying goes, which came first, the chicken or the egg? And the believer knows from reading Genesis that it was the chicken! Seriously, all this supply-chain talk reveals the ingenuity of humanity routinely serving people they will never meet in amazing ways, alongside the fact that most everybody actually takes all supply chains for granted, as kind of a birthright—from the unseen farmers and wheat processors...to truckers and storage facilities...to distribution centers and grocery stores...to pizza joints and delivery services!

Beyond consumers, modern military strategists understand the crucial importance of supply chain. Oftentimes that's couched in some circles as "logistics," which is thought by some to be a key subset of the broader supply chain dynamics—here with logistics being the part that is in direct control of the military. For sure, key battles can be and are lost due to lack of effective logistics, when military personnel lack the food or machinery or engine fuel to advance against the enemy or even just "hold the fort."

But if we accept that "supply chain" is a broader issue than "logistics," well then, supply chain is indeed super-essential to any escalating war effort. Just ask Churchill and Britain in World War II, desperately needing the U.S. to source vital matériel like ocean transportation via the famous Lend-Lease program. In fact, the *military readiness* protecting the sovereignty of a nation is the duty of every competent national leader—and that means having comprehensive supply chains of matériel and people at the ready.

The truth is, all the various facets of supply chain expertise and expectations have been evolving for centuries, resulting in the extreme sophistication of today. Yes, for wars, that evolved out of necessity of self-defense against neighboring despots and marauders. But supply-chain evolution in the more mundane affairs of humanity is relentless. History tells us that in 1501, a seafaring Portuguese expedition was first in bringing new spices to Europe from India, and Portugal went on to lead seafaring trading in Europe for decades. Yes, including spices! Remember that shopping list that included a bike, pickles, and cinnamon? Our era is a long way from Europeans encountering cinnamon through a new supply chain—today, an American consumer shopping for Christmas baking supplies routinely expects that, on any given day, McCormick's-brand ground cinnamon will certainly be on the shelf! Wow, are we spoiled, or what?

That brings us back to supply chain headlines. Here's a huge, two-step irony of our times. The foundational reason the words *supply chain* are on the lips of billions of people around the world is because, for centuries, free markets and human ingenuity have fostered amazing expectations that cars, bikes, pickles, hair gel, cinnamon, and pizza are routinely easily available with the click of a few digital buttons or a quick retail store excursion. That's right, a proven foundation of extraordinary supply chains *everywhere*. Super-efficient delivery. Vital needs met. Huge end-user satisfaction. But of course, the "second-step" *real* reason that supply chain is in the headlines nowadays is because some key supply chains are *not* working very well. From toilet paper to furniture to cars, consumers are distressed about the lack of products and services they perceive to pretty much be a birthright. That's right—spoiled by past supply-chain brilliance!

Of course, the ultimate supply chain was forged by Christ and Him crucified! Indeed, salvation, Kingdom citizenship, and eternal fellowship with God is delivered by God's grace and that delivery is willfully accepted by believers' faith in Christ. Stunningly, God gives believers the privilege of being part of that ultimate supply chain with the proclaiming of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God! Now, that's a headline worth pursuing—and while COVID-instigated headlines will go away, the Gospel supply chain is timeless!

A&A: Application & Action

1. Describe the full supply chain for your workplace's product or service, from beginning to end. About how many different stages do you estimate are required, starting with the most basic raw materials?
2. Has the supply chain for your workplace's product or service changed during the COVID pandemic? Are your customers or clients generally having a better or a worse experience now? Be specific.
3. How effective is your church in its role in the Great-Commission supply chain—the effective transporting of the Gospel and discipling—to your neighborhood and the nations? Provide details as to how that specifically works and is measured by your church.