

The Beginning

I see the glint of anger in his eye, but carry on regardless.

“The problem is that we’re looking for things to do.” I hear a distant voice saying and am a little surprised to recognise that voice as mine.

“You think we’re doing the wrong things?” comes the slightly puzzled response.

“Yes. Well, yes, sort of. I think that’s the problem.” Even I don’t understand quite what I’m saying or why. The company is in trouble, we need to do something about it, ergo we need to do things, yet I hear myself arguing against this basic truth.

“Oh come on. We are facing some of the most difficult times in the industry’s history. You of all people ought to have recognised that.” Philip sighs before adding, “I’m disappointed,” his face etched in a way that seems to make the comment superfluous. “We can’t bury our heads in the sand any longer. There’s just no future for us if we leave things as they are. We’ve really got to change things round.”

I'm in Philip Mutton's Office. You won't know yet, but Philip is the boss, the CEO as he trans-atlantically likes to be called, and what you might already sense is that things are not going so well for me.

I try to state my case.

"I know we have to change. I'm not arguing that we don't. Hell I've led the change programme for the past three years. Look!"

I thrust my company pass towards him. It's been dangling around my neck on its silver coloured chain, one of the trappings of modern working life. I see the photograph. On each anniversary of joining the company it's replaced by a new one, and each a testament to just how non-photogenic I am. Sure enough it captures the basic features of my face, and each year, pixel by pixel it records the now 46 year long struggle of briefly holding a cocktail of chemical compounds in human form, before they return to the Earth from whence they came. But each picture seems to carry a distortion, a difference from reality.

Alongside my picture is the name, 'Robert Jones' (Bob to my friends) and my title, the focus of my immediate attention. I read it aloud. "Head of Improvement, that much I do know," I assert.

The use of sarcasm is not often a good move in these situations, and today is certainly no exception.

I, the Head of Improvement, am in the boss's office arguing with him that the recommendations made by consultants that I commissioned and I approved and I agreed, should not be followed. At the best of times this is not a good situation to be in. However you may already sense that these are far from the best of times, and my felony is thus compounded.

Had I any good sense I'd beat the retreat, but something in that distant voice stops me from doing so.

Philip moves around his desk agitatedly looking for something. It crosses my mind that perhaps the search is for something heavy to throw at me. Not that he's a violent man, but there's an ominous look about him today. His tirade goes on as the search continues.

“Ah, but only things that aren't going to affect you,” he adds. “You're happy with change as long as *you* don't have to do it. That's the problem with this company. Everyone sees the need to do things differently, but they all see the need everywhere except in themselves.”

Philip's annoyed, more annoyed than I've ever seen him, and I'm here to feel its brunt. He's still rummaging through the piles of papers on the desk when he opens a drawer and pulls out a paperweight. The heavy object? No, he returns it to the drawer. A paper knife appears next, no surely not a sustained attack by mock sharp object. But that returns too and the search continues, as does his tirade.

“I see it all the time. We all need to change, means *you* all need to change – everyone but me.”

The irony that I've battled the last three years with exactly this view of the man who is now lecturing me, bites more deeply with each word he adds.

“It's got past that stage now,” he continues, “unless we all buy into the improvements then we're doomed. We've let too many people opt out of what needs doing. They think they can just carry on as they are and wait for change to pass over them.”

He pulls out a stapler, I fear weeks in the hospital special intensive care ward with fellow victims of hideous body piercing accidents, but no, that too is returned. He's still barely drawn breath.

“They’re the people who are going to kill this company and I’m staggered that you are arguing their case.” For a moment his anger becomes a plea. “We’ve got to show solidarity. For god’s sake, if we aren’t all committed to the plan, then how can we expect the staff to be?”

At last a pause, and I boldly step in to continue the fight.

“But that’s not what I’m saying.”

He momentarily stops his searching and faces me, eyes wide, nostrils flared. “What exactly are you saying?”

My boldness is all too quickly revealed as mere recklessness, “I’m not totally sure,” I confess, “but I think the change programme is wrong. I don’t think it’s going to save us,” my voice far more a whimper than ever intended.

“And you know what is, I suppose?” he asks, his eyes boring into me.

“Well no, but.”

Wagging his finger accusingly he adds. “You commissioned these consultants, and you approved each step of the process as they reported back, and now you don’t like their recommendations.”

He looks me in the eye and I know he is right, and yet I know he is wrong, profoundly wrong. But I have no words with which to untangle the paradox and am compelled to listen to his.

“Look, I’ve heard enough. This plan has got to be pushed through.”

Another drawer opens and this time a hole-punch appears. I try not to imagine its use. Held in a finger pointing hand, it’s shaken in my direction as Philip continues, releasing a gentle spray of circular confetti which only I seem to be aware of.

“Those consultants have climbed all over the company. They’ve measured every god damned thing ten times over. They’ve come up with this plan as the solution. You know how much we’ve paid them to draw up a plan of action?” he asks accusingly.

Of course I know only too well. I signed the cheques, but this won’t stop me being told.

“Let me tell you, it’s a small fortune. A small fortune paid for by Head Office, and one they want paying back big style.”

The search locks onto a copy of the report, the product of the consultants’ review, which becomes the latest object to be waved angrily in my direction. A frustrated shake proves too much for the retaining clips and the pages become a colourful cascade poured onto his desk, whilst Philip is left holding the report’s glossy covers. He prods at the now disgorged contents piled haphazardly between us, resolutely ignoring its state of disarray as he describes its contents.

“It sets out exactly what we need to do. Hellfire you’ve seen the graphs and charts, the figures and projections of what will happen if we don’t improve, and how things will shape up if we do.”

He pulls at one of the sheets, a magician choosing from a badly shuffled pack of cards. He’s good, very good. It’s the report’s key page, a graph with two contrasting lines, green heading skyward and red plummeting to Earth. Two contrasting flights of stairs and he desperately wants the green stairway to the stars.

He jabs at the picture clearly believing that this will aid my understanding as he continues, “But we’ve all got to pull together. No shirking and no lack of unity. You were at the meetings. You saw the presentations.”

The prodding finger turns into a fist as he thumps the table. “One thing I won’t abide is people nodding in the meetings and then taking their disagreements with them, out into the factory. Listen. If you aren’t with this change; if you aren’t prepared to support it, and I mean really support it, then there’s no place for you here. It’s as serious as that. I’m sorry, but this is our last chance to get things right. You, and all of the team have got to be totally supportive, or we’ll fail. I want you to think about that. Think about it very seriously. You are either with us, or you pack your bags, and that goes for anyone else in the management team; anyone else in the company.”

He senses that his work is now done and underlines its conclusion. “I have another meeting now. I want you to think about what I’ve said and come to see me later this week. Talk to Mary about a slot in the diary. I have to go now.”

Just as a cloud crossing the autumn sun heralds the chill of change, I cease to be the focus of his attention and anger, and he returns to his search.

As I leave the office I hear him calling “Mary, can you sort this out please. Mary, Mary, are you there?”

The adjoining office through which I have to pass, Mary’s lair, is empty. Well small mercies, at least she’s missed my dressing down. For a moment I imagine how desperately disappointed she will be.

“Mary, the finance report, do you know where it is?”

I hear Philip heading from his office in search of his aide and hasten my retreat.

How had we arrived at this? We’d worked together for around a dozen of the twenty-plus years I’d been with the company. We’d been great colleagues and good friends and seen the business

through some great times, some tricky ones too. Everything I'd done had the interests of the company at heart. I'd given everything and sacrificed much at home for the company. And here I was virtually being accused of treason. What would my wife say if she knew? Emma knew all about what I'd missed, times with her and the children, days when I'd arrived home at midnight, or not at all, called away to travel to distant meetings. Birthday's that had slipped by and holidays we'd cancelled, and all for what? I didn't need to know what she would say. Words would sit at the periphery. At the heart an explosion of emotion, and its force would be directed at me. How could I have been so stupid? How many times had she told me that I was crazy? She'd known all along that my commitment was madness.

I couldn't tell her. But I needed to. I needed to tell her something. I needed someone on my side, to lessen the sudden desperate feeling of isolation that engulfed me. I needed someone to confide in. She would support me. She'd support me on anything, maybe anything but this. I pushed the sense of doubt to one side, for the moment I needed to clear my mind.

Walking slowly back towards my office, stopping off en route by the water fountain, the drink was cold, almost too cold sending an involuntary shiver through my body. I sat cradling the plastic cup for a moment to compose my thoughts. I'd never seen Philip that way before. Of course the pressure was on. Things were tough in our business and just kept getting tougher. We had competition from abroad, from China, India and elsewhere and the pressure was on to compete and that meant improvement, continuous improvement if we were to survive. I knew that deep down he was a caring guy, wanted to do the right things, but he'd done all the wrong things to me this morning. Perhaps, if I'd been in the mood for reflection, I might have seen the futures of hundreds of people riding on his back and caring for them, outweighed caring for me,

but I was in no mood to make such allowances just yet. I just needed some space.

I'd fix the time for our next meeting and then go and do some thinking, but I'd need all the time I could get and had further reason to be grateful that I'd slipped through Mary's clutches. It would be much easier to lie on the telephone.

“Oh hi Robert, yes, Philip said you'd be in touch.”

I bet he did, I thought. It couldn't be fifteen minutes since I'd left him and already he'd briefed her, twisting the knife deep in my wound.

“Philip is out all day tomorrow and busy the following morning. How about two o'clock that afternoon, Friday?” she continued.

I declined this and two other possible times, pretending that I had meetings away from the office, so that the earliest time we were both available was Monday afternoon. If I needed thinking time, this was the only way to get it.

“Ok, I'll let you know if Philip's arrangements change.”

As I put down the telephone, I smiled at what was my first minor victory.