

Bob Gunn, Editor

Drama on the 21st Floor

BY ROBERT W. GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

The newly promoted general manager entered a meeting of her management team 90 minutes late and burst into tears. Why? Three hours earlier, Claire had been called to the executive level to debate, for the 88th time, the merits of a particular package for a new product launch. That design decision

had been postponed, rescheduled, cancelled, and then forced into a 60-minute window just prior to the meeting of Claire's management team. Predictably, the executives started late and got mired in detail.

Meanwhile, down on the 21st floor, how did the waiting managers feel as time wore on? "Furious!" "Disrespected." "Unhappy; we all made an effort to be here even though it's the last day of the month." "Disappointed." "Humiliated."

And not for the first time.

Studies at this company had already fingered cavalier attitudes about meeting etiquette as a contributing factor to abysmal scores on employee satisfaction, but this was Claire's first direct exposure to the problem. Having been transferred from Paris a few months before, she had heard rumors about unrest in



the London office. But this experience felt like someone had thrown ice water in her face.

Beyond that, Claire was shocked by her own behavior. She had taken pride in her reputation as an excellent people manager, a leader who engendered trust, a person with whom anyone could speak their mind. She knew that her managers' meeting had been on the books for

more than a month, yet she kept silent in the design meeting. She hadn't been able to tell her boss that she was keeping 14 managers waiting. Hoping for closure "any minute," she didn't even call the conference room to let her people know that she was going to be late.

The moment she saw their faces, her outburst came spontaneously. "I left a meeting that felt like the coldest part of Antarctica and walked into a room that felt like a blast furnace as soon as the hot tears of shame rolled down my cheeks," she said later.

Angry as they were, the managers could see that Claire was as much a victim of the culture as they. From bitter experience, her behavior was familiar. All the way to the top, the unwritten rule was, "My schedule is more important than yours, so I can make you wait until I am ready."

Chaos reigned by the close of every day. Veterans became familiar with meeting overruns and unexpected calls that routinely snow-

balled, wreaking havoc on schedules. They knew to call the meeting room to “see when the most senior person was going to arrive” before putting aside whatever they were doing. And if you really, really needed someone’s attention, get on his or her schedule first thing in the day.

Claire’s honesty gave the meeting facilitator an opening to explore what it would take to change this cultural norm. The managers began to speak from the heart about the behaviors they would like to exhibit and, even more important, the feelings and assumptions that generate these behaviors.

“Shouldn’t we give ourselves permission to speak up when our bosses are acting disrespectfully?” asked the creative manager. The sales head pointed out, “I feel a sense of relief from just hearing that other people feel the same way I do. I realize that I’m not the only one.” The HR manager shared a deep insight that she was spending too much of her time “cleaning up the bad feelings caused by the senior leaders, which is decidedly not what the company is paying me to accomplish!” And the sales training leader acknowledged Claire’s “courage for letting her feelings come out—you helped me see that I, too, have been a complicit part of the problem.” Claire was overwhelmed by this positive outcome.

But what she did may make older executives cringe. Forty years ago, as women fought to prove they could manage as well as men, that they were not hysterical creatures but strong performers, Claire’s tears would have constituted an unforgivable breach. (“You are allowed to cry on the job once,” Betsy’s mentor, a pioneering woman editor, sternly warned her. “But once only.”) Men

as well as women were expected to be solid and stolid. Feeling the need to watch what we said, we developed a finely tuned persona—with gray flannel armor and a pre-Botox mask covering up honest feelings.

We dressed for work as if we were going off to war—or at least to a bullfight.

Before entering the ring—his/her place of business—a matador dons a dazzling “suit of lights.” In a tradition that reaches back to the 18th Century, the matador wears a short jacket, a vest, a white shirt, a narrow black or red tie, and coral-pink silk stockings. He slips his legs into skintight trousers of silk and satin, richly beaded and embroidered, tied with ribbons below the knees. His shoes are flat, black slippers. On his head he wears a special handmade hat called a montera over hair distinguished by a short pigtail fastened to the head with a silver disk. For his formal entry into the ring, the matador drapes over his shoulder a dress cape of satin, heavily embroidered with gold and silver thread.

All this is meticulously arranged about an hour before the bullfight in front of honored guests in a solemn process. The “suit of lights” is more than a uniform, more even than a marker of hard-won expertise (only “certified” matadors are allowed such adornment). The ritual of dressing this way makes a transition from mundane acts to the life-and-death arena. It transforms a man or, in recent years, a woman, from the ordinary to something other, to someone truly willing to put himself/herself on the line.

For many employees of traditional corporations, going to work often feels like entering the bullring. The environment is so stiff or hostile, or

the culture is so indifferent to individuals, that we draw around us a business persona—a cloak that covers our authentic personality.

The irony is that only when we connect with others and to what really matters to us can we perform at our best. Not only do our thoughts flow freely, but we are also attuned to feelings—our own and those of our associates. Grounded in our common sense, we can even talk about emotionally charged issues in a way that encourages problem-solving dialogue. But when we try to sit on honest concerns, we cut ourselves off from our own strength—our insights and wisdom. We expend our energy on keeping things “stuffed” rather than on getting results. In short, organizations that shut people down cut off potential sources of productive energy.

It was to Claire’s credit and courage that she gave voice to her painful thoughts. Her openness and authenticity softened the room. Strong enough to drop her corporate mask, Claire’s nerve made possible a different, powerful connection with her team. Her emotional rollercoaster ride during that three-hour period had unexpected benefits: Her team feels bonded, they have a goal, and they are looking for her to guide them while being completely committed to making the change happen themselves. ■

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