



Taming of the Zoo

“Hi Cy! It’s great to see you again!” Pete stood to shake Cy’s hand as he found his way to the table.

“Sorry I’m late, Pete. Things are getting pretty crazy around the office these days.”

“So I hear.”

“You’re looking terrific. Have you been working out?”

“Thanks. I’m not pumping iron, but I’ve made a few lifestyle changes I should have made years ago.”

Cy ordered a Coke and Pete ordered cranberry juice mixed with club soda.

“That sounds pretty healthy,” Cy said.

“Yeah. I sure am finding that we are what we eat and drink.”

“Pete, I’ll get right to the point. The reason I asked to meet with you is because I want to offer you the position of senior vice president.”

“Really? Are you kidding? That’s Doug’s position.”

“Not anymore. I let him go a few days ago. I should have done it much, much sooner. But he really played me like a

fiddle. Now that I see the full picture, I feel like a complete fool. Doug was clearly a master at kissing up and kicking down. He told me and the board exactly what we wanted to hear. He was very good with our key clients. They loved him. He also impressed our bankers with his take-charge, decisive demeanor. They considered him a real leader.”

The waiter arrived with their drinks and asked for their lunch order. Pete ordered a large spinach salad topped with nuts, and strips of grilled teriyaki salmon with low-fat dressing on the side. “I’ll have the same,” Cy said. “It’s clearly working for this guy.”

Cy jumped right back into his story. “I was getting more and more uncomfortable with Doug’s leadership after Heather began updating me on the big turnaround you were orchestrating in operations. The day he fired you, I was at sea on the first day of a cruise vacation. I promised myself and Irene – given all the stress of the past year – that this really was a vacation and I wouldn’t check e-mail. It was almost a week after you were fired that I read Heather’s e-mail. She said we couldn’t afford to lose you at this critical juncture.”

Cy took a long sip of Coke and glanced briefly out the window. “Once I got back to the office I went to work on getting to the bottom of this whole mess. I had been so consumed by our financial crisis that I’d grown out of touch with what was happening throughout the company. Since you seemed to be on your way back to a strong leadership position, turning things around in operations, I was paying even less attention to what was going on in your area.”

Turning back to Pete, he said, “You certainly have a bunch of very loyal supporters. Harold, Rosie, and Duncan took some real risks in approaching me. Each one did so independently. They initiated those courageous conversations that Jason Reynard writes and talks about so well. All three of them strongly objected to your firing and told me

how Doug was actually running things and treating people. Somehow Doug caught wind of Duncan's support for you. Heather alerted me that Doug was having HR prepare Duncan's severance package. I immediately contacted Doug and put a stop to it."

Pete could just imagine Doug's quivering double-chin clapper during that interaction.

Cy continued, "I also heard about Jon's process-management research and went to see him to find out about what he and his team had been learning. He gave me the presentation that you and he prepared for Doug. Very impressive and enlightening! We clearly need to act on those findings immediately.

"Then I met with Doug to discuss your firing. He presented a flimsy case for why he let you go. So the picture was complete. I clearly saw that we had a very weak senior VP who got rid of you because you were standing up to him and using approaches that contradicted his bullying style. His fear and insecurity drove him to shut down any dissent or real discussions."

Their salads arrived.

"I then had to get to work covering our bases with key customers. So over the last few weeks – in preparation for letting Doug go – I worked hard to strengthen relationships with a few key clients who were particularly attached to Doug. It was tricky because Doug had built almost exclusive relationships with them and was trying to keep me away. We couldn't afford for them to get skittish when I dismissed him. I also had to alert our bankers to what I was planning to do, and why, so they wouldn't suddenly pull the plug. That incredible Clockroaches memo sure helped. If you accept the job, they want to meet with you as soon as possible."

"I am flattered by your offer, Cy. But for your sake and mine, I've got to ensure this is the right move at this point in

my life. Could I have a few days to think this over and talk to Michelle?”

“Of course.”



“So what are you going to do about the job offer?” Michelle asked him on their evening walk.

“It’s an embarrassment of riches. A couple of the other jobs I’m up for are very appealing. But this senior VP role is a great opportunity to build on the experience and work I started in operations. But if I do go back, it will be on my terms.”

Later that evening Pete was reviewing his career-planning notes and journal reflections. Michelle put her hand on his shoulder and asked, “Is my beloved hero looking back on his road of trials to decide which direction to take ahead on his road back?”

“Yeah, something like that,” Pete said. “Most of all, I want to ensure that if I take this position, I’m doing it as an extension of my values and strengths, and not just for the power, prestige, and money. I want to master my job from a position of alignment, so that the job doesn’t – once again – master me.”

“You know I couldn’t resist doing a bit of research on Cy Garnet’s name,” Michelle said. “Cyril’ is the Greek form of a Persian name that may mean ‘far-sighted.’ Given that he hired Doug and let that situation get so badly out of control, I’m not sure that fits. However, ‘Garnet’ comes from an Old English surname meaning ‘hinge,’ as originally denoting a person who sold hinges.”



When Pete was escorted out of NMTS, he had no expectation of ever darkening its doors again. But now here he was sitting with Cy chit-chatting about their families and summer vacations – just like the old days. Pete thought about how Cy’s modest office created a much more positive and action-oriented environment than Doug’s fake palatial suite.

About ten minutes in, Cy asked Pete if he was going to accept the job offer.

“As I said on the phone, I’m certainly interested in pursuing it further,” Pete said. “But if I am going to take it on, I want to do it very differently than Doug did. Since I haven’t reported directly to you for years – and our personal and company circumstances are dramatically different – I’d like to see if you would support the approach I’d want to take.”

Cy was all ears. “We certainly do need to do things differently around here,” he said. “If we keep doing what we’ve been doing, we’ll keep getting the lousy results we’ve been getting. So what are your conditions for getting back on board and taking the helm?”

“They aren’t conditions so much as ensuring that you’d support what I’d want to do and how I would do it.” Pete pulled a notepad from his small blue satchel. “I’ve got a few notes.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

“All right. As you know, we really need more office space. I also want to spend much more time actively leading people and much less time managing things – especially chained to my desk dealing with e-mails. Rather than moving into Doug’s regal suite, I want to turn it into a mapping and planning room for our improvement teams. I’ll be ‘hoteling.’ That means I won’t have an office. Using mobile technology, I’ll set up where ever I find a spot or in one of our other meeting rooms when I need privacy.”

“That’s a bit radical, but I can see where you’re going with this approach. If I am not using my office, you can come in here too.”

“Okay, thanks. I also need you to buy into dealing with all the moose – no matter how sacred they may be. We have some major corporate issues that are getting in the way of our departments and teams. This will inevitably lead right up to you, the board, our clients, and maybe even our bankers. I need you to be prepared to put everything on the table.”

“I don’t know, Pete. I can’t just give you a blank check on that one,” Cy responded with a worried look.

“Cy, we need to open up everything to discussion and debate. Are you prepared to have open conversations and act on what clearly needs to be done?”

“Pete, there are some non-negotiables in the way this company is run.”

“And that’s where the moose love to hide. We may not be able to control or change some of those things, but we have to put them on the table to explore our options. When we see these issues for what they are, they lose power.”

“I’m concerned about how far this will go, and how productive it’s going to be when what we really need is less talk and more action.”

“I strongly agree that we need action. But that action has to be based on a proper analysis that gets at the root causes or systemic origins of many of our biggest problems. We’ve got to stop running madly around slapping band-aids on a bunch of symptoms without fixing the underlying conditions. We’ve got lots of action now, but it’s helter-skelter.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“So we need to harness the collective brainpower and experience of everyone to really understand what’s going on. Then we need everyone’s strong buy-in and commitment to

implementing the big changes we need to make. As Jason Reynard says, ‘If they help plan the battle, they are less likely to battle the plan.’”

“I can see that.”

“We’ve had way too much going-along-to-get-along and inauthentic conversations around here. This behavior has attracted a major herd of moose that are getting in the way and slowing us down. We need loud debates, heated conflict, and healthy arguments.”

“That’s the part I am having real trouble with. We have enough problems now. I don’t see how more conflict is a good thing.”

“Let me give you an example. Two Saturdays ago, Ryan was home from university. It’s a rare treat to have him home, so we tried to figure out what to do for some nice family time together. It’s been a while since we did anything together, so the ideas weren’t exactly plentiful. After a bit of overly polite discussion, the four of us agreed to pile in our car and drive ninety minutes to the zoo. It took three hours to get back, due to a huge traffic jam. I think the whole trip was mostly for old time’s sake. At the zoo, we spent four hours trudging around from pavilion to pavilion – in the rain – looking at exhibits that hadn’t changed in years.

“It was a quiet ride there and a sullen ride back. As we sat there stuck in traffic seven dismal hours later, we finally vented our true feelings. Cy, *not one us* had wanted to go to the zoo in the first place. Everybody was being too polite and going along with what they thought the others wanted to do. If we’d had an open conversation about how everyone really felt, we would have had a much better time together.”

“Been there, done that,” Cy said with a chuckle.

“We’ve been on way too many trips to the zoo around here. We need to learn how to argue without being argumentative.

We have to learn how to attack all sides of the issue without attacking each other. That's a huge culture change for us."

"Yes, it is. We do avoid voicing disagreement and differences of opinion – to each other's faces anyway."

"That's for sure. We need frank and very open communication on our financial crisis. We have to stop trying to 'motivate' people with lofty visions and varnished truths about our dire predicament. If we're ever going to turn things around, we must build an open and fear-free environment where we can all work together."

"I am uncomfortable about what you're proposing," Cy replied. "But maybe that's the way it should be. We've become just a little too comfortable and set in our ways. And obviously avoiding the issues hasn't worked. We do go to the zoo a little too often. "

"So we've got to engage everyone in turning this company around. We need to get an LFA process going immediately."

"I know Jason is a big advocate of that approach. Remind me again what it is."

"I was just refreshing myself on it last night from one of his books. It's Listen-Feedback-Action. Basically it starts with a survey and/or focus groups to gather systematic input on the key issues that need to be addressed. Once that data is compiled and summarized, it's fed back to everyone in a series of open forums or 'town hall' meetings. Teams then identify improvement actions they're going to take and send action ideas up to the corporate level for broader implementation."

"Do we have the time to do something as extensive as that?"

"We already have some survey data that we could supplement with a few focus groups, e-mail surveys, and one-on-one interviews by a neutral, outside consultant. It would take some upfront time – which I am sure we could cut down. But the real time savings come in the time to implement because

everyone is now on board, understands what needs to be done, and can go straight back and do it. I'd want to couple the input we gather with the process and other data-driven analysis that the operations Strategic Imperative teams have developed."

"I can see that. Well, Pete, you've clearly thought this through. You're making me squirm with some of what you want to do, but I am even more convinced now that we need your leadership. Are you on-board?"

"If you support what I am planning to do, then yes, I'd do it at the drop of a hat."

"Terrific!" Cy rose from his chair and extended his hand. Pete grasped it and they firmly shook hands.

"Let's do it!" Cy said.