

Training

A short story by
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It had been a bleak day. A bad cold had made me increasingly uncomfortable and the proposal for a reshuffle of management portfolios had increased my sense of insecurity. The office had been unusually quiet with most staff out and about. My management colleagues were either at meetings or in associated transit. That was usually how it was for me too. But today was different. I had stayed in my office. My contract was due for review and the CEO had wanted to fit in an hour during his day's schedule to discuss my performance with me. That was how I knew about the likely changes in my responsibilities, and how I came to have the subject of management training on my mind.

Somehow my professional training and years of experience were no longer enough. The CEO had raised the question of improving my knowledge and expertise. He had suggested further education in management would benefit both the agency and my career. He had drawn an analogy between individuals and business units. I needed to become a mini business unit to be contracted when and where I was needed. Or did that mean when and where I was wanted? As I sat in my office facing computer, phones and weekly planner, the loss of an earlier way of working nearly overwhelmed me.

Work in earlier years had been more like being a member of a large family. We grew up as we worked together. We were friends as well as colleagues. We argued. Got over it, argued again, got on with the task at hand, shared the successes and supported each other through the tough times. Now it was hard to find time for reflecting on our work. Gone were the professional debates that sharpened our practice. We were described as members of teams, but it felt more like being allocated to a group. And the groups seldom remained the same for six months at a stretch.

I wondered what my contemporaries from those days were up to. It was a while since we had been in touch. I remembered how we had promised to meet up from time to time and we had honoured our pledge, meeting at least once each year in spite of distance and busyness. Now was as good a time as any to arrange another date. I pushed aside papers and files, and pulled out my diary. The phone numbers were all there on the back page, kept carefully updated.



Six o'clock on a windy evening. A quiet drink together before dinner. It had been an excellent suggestion. We had

been ready to recapture the old friendships and to reminisce. There was a warming hubbub of voices. Glasses clinked. There were greetings; puffs of laughter. The light was flatteringly soft on our tired faces.

Our group of five sat in the corner near the fire. We were going to make an evening of it now we had made the effort to get away from work and family demands. Preliminary exchanges had been concluded. A second round of drinks had been ordered. We had begun to relax and superficial banter was giving way to more serious conversation. Soon some of our real concerns would surface and we would draw on that longstanding companionship. Already we had grown less aware of others nearby. Touches of emotion were sounding in our voices. Managing organisations was a complex business, we agreed. But we all seemed committed to it – more or less.

I was suddenly conscious of my age and the wistful tone in my voice when asked how things were going for me.

'Wouldn't mind a promotion. A bit more money. But you need an MBA these days and I don't want to line myself up for another uni course. The boss is pressing me to do more training. Wants to make more changes.'

'You could do it.' Matt was always encouraging and optimistic. 'You're pretty smart.'

'Yeah, but it's the time and expense. Not easy with the family growing up.'

'No, that's true. But what about doing a short course or something that has a certificate attached?' Matt was also a lateral thinker, one of his real strengths.

'Depends what you want to learn.' Val's voice was thoughtful. 'I joined a group that meets each month. It has an official sounding title: Millennium Managers Capacity Building. Membership is considered as good as doing a uni course.'

'Really?' I was surprised.

'Yes, well it promotes in-depth stuff. You know, reflective learning. Things that have immediate relevance to management practice.' Val had obviously thought it through. She sounded like she knew too.

'Like practice based learning?' I asked.

'Well, sort of. More like learning from your own and from one another's experiences. Sharing them and exploring them with the help of the group's mentor. My boss thinks it's better than an MBA. Encourages all of us to attend a group, but we are members of different groups, of course. Easier than having your fellow workers sitting in. Why don't you try that, Marg?'

'D'you put it on your CV?'

'Hell, yes! Being part of a continuous learning process is all the go.'

'So what's different about it? You know, from just a regular chat about things?' I had begun to feel curious. It sounded like an option for me.

'Well . . . I guess you could say we get to investigate issues together. Debate points of view. Talk about our decisions. The hows and whys of it all. Helps open up other options . . . I've changed a fair bit since I've been going, I think.'

'Hadn't noticed!' It was Craig's mocking tone. He wasn't yet ready for such an intense conversation. He was the one in our group who avoided what he called 'heavy scenes'.

'You would if you still worked with me, though,' Val retorted pointedly. 'Or maybe you wouldn't, I dunno. But I feel like I do things differently,' she mused.

'Oh, Craig.' I was scolding. 'You've jumped in and out of training so many times I've lost count! You rave on about them and then you never finish any of them from what I can see.'

'OK, OK. I know. I find it's just too hard to get assignments and essays done when you're working fulltime. Matt, you did something recently, though, didn't you? Some training course?' Craig was conciliatory, moving attention to Matt's last experience.

'Yeah. Not sure it measured up to Val's Millennium group though. Sounded great. Stuff about how to deal with people on a day to day basis and how to get the best out of yourself . . . 'Teamwork at every level is the key to a successful business'.' Matt could remember quotes better than anyone I knew. He could produce one in a flash and it was always pertinent to the issue at hand.

'Tell us more,' asked Allan. He had been listening quietly, clearly interested in the subject.

'They recommended books with titles like 'Turboworking for Spectacular Success'. The focus was on motivation and leadership. We went to the convention centre at Verdana in the hills. Pretty upmarket! There were about 40 of us I suppose from all sorts of organisations. But only a few of us from the human services industry and only two from welfare agencies – me included.'

'So what did you do?' Val pushed for more detail.

'Spent several days listening to speakers. Did the Myers-Briggs thing to develop self awareness. Lots of small group exercises and reporting back. Interesting in parts. The best bit was realising that in human services we are more on top of that stuff than folk from the world of retail and commerce. No time was allowed for the real debates though, the ideological ones. No depth.' Matt had been disappointed on this count. 'There wasn't really much new stuff. Stuff that I could say I now use at work.'

'Expensive?' Craig was good in financial matters, and cost-benefit analysis was close to his heart, though he defined benefit broadly as we all did.

'What do you think!' laughed Matt. 'Committee of Management thought I should go. Said things like 'CEOs need to stay abreast of current issues' and 'continuous learning enhances agency management'. They decided the \$4000 over five days could be viewed as an investment. Worked out it came to \$800 per year 'cos I hadn't attended any training for 5 years! But to be fair, I actually wanted to give it a go. You need to keep up to date with what's going on, even if it's not that useful.'

'I agree. But my entrée into the training thing was rather a fizzer.' It was clear Allan had a story to tell. It showed in the gleam of his eyes. It sounded in the tone of his voice. This had the potential to be entertaining.

Silence. We all looked at him expectantly.

'Well . . . tell us then. Don't keep us in suspense.' I loved Allan's stories. They were so often the ones that couldn't be told outside of an intimate group of colleagues and that made them even more fun.

'Let me finish my beer!' He was stalling, enjoying our anticipation.

'Oh. Someone get another round. Allan's catching up.' Craig was always a drink ahead of the rest of us.

'In a minute. In a minute. It's my shout, but I want to hear the story first.' I was savouring the moment, wondering what Allan would tell us.

'Come on Allan. Out with it, then.' Craig had a twinkle in his eye too. It was partly the red wine and partly his penchant for a good yarn.

'This is a course.' There was a rustle as Allan reached into his briefcase.

Val feigned disgust as Allan raised a leather-bound diary on high like a preacher of old. 'That's a diary!' she declared.

'What do you mean 'This is a course'?' asked Matt. He was clearly intrigued.

'That's my \$700 diary! Don't knock it. Careful! It's an expensive purchase.' Allan remonstrated as Val reached for it, wanting a closer look.

'Oh, go on . . . there must have been more to it,' Matt countered.

'Are you serious?'

'Really?'

'Go on!'

The chorus of voices presses Allan to elaborate.

'This was a two day course in management,' Allan continued to wave the diary just out of Val's reach and waited for quiet.

'I'm serious. I think it was a very clever marketing ploy. That's what they were really on about when it came to the point. Selling a bloody diary. And here's the rest.' More rustling as his hand groped about in the satchel beside his feet.

'Here we go. Stationery updates. They send you this later and it arrived today. You have to buy this to go in your diary. It's special stuff. Can't just buy this in any old place, you know. We had to be trained so we knew how to operate all this properly.'

'You're joking!' Matt was incredulous now, and I was finding it all rather hard to believe too.

'No. I'm fair dinkum.' Allan laughed, then continued more soberly. 'But I guess I got some good clues out of the exercise. Not \$700 worth, though. It was a very expensive exercise for the agency for the sake of a diary and a few clues.'

'What a ploy! They suck you into using their diary? And then what? You buy all this stuff?' Craig was enjoying this.

'Yep. And you're supposed to buy all your monthly planners and stuff to go in it. And here's another one.' He reached for yet another item from his briefcase. 'My mother gave me a diary for Christmas!'

'And it cost him nothing!' drawled Craig.

A burst of laughter followed. It was unbelievable, the tricks that could be dreamt up in the name of training.

'So what else *did* you get out of it?' Val's thoughtful voice emerged from the mirth.

'I guess it got me a bit motivated in some ways. You wouldn't know it now, but I did clean up my office. Reorganised my filing cabinets. I realised that things really were pretty cluttered. Piles of stuff everywhere. You know how it is.'

'Did you want to learn about *that*?' I asked dryly, thinking about my own difficulties keeping an orderly office.

'No, no. Look, it was really just a very expensive diary . . . You've got to hand it to them. They ran two groups of about 16 people. Would've made all of \$21 grand in the week. I worked it out later. Two of them staying here for four nights. A bit for travel by car and the cost of the venue which wouldn't have been much really. Then thirty-odd diaries. They must have made at least \$8000 each for the week after costs. You work it out.'

As the next round of drinks arrived Allan's account continued to hold our attention.

'Gee . . . and to think you could've just held off and got a free one for Christmas.' Matt commented with a cheeky expression.

'At that rate I'd only have to work about 10 to 12 weeks in the year. Just enough to get organised. Get the stuff printed and do the advertising,' added Craig. I could see his mind was running with the possibilities. The cost-benefit ratio would be all in his favour and it sounded very tempting.

'Not bad, hey?' Allan chuckled again. 'I tell you I wasn't impressed, but I thought it was clever. I never would have guessed from the advertising that I wasn't going to get a thorough dose of management training.'

'Impressed with the cleverness. Yeah. I am too,' said Val, sardonic now. 'Just goes to show. Mention training and you have to be a bloody research expert just to be sure you know what you're getting.'

She was right. It might be amusing, but this episode made me feel even more doubtful about a commitment to training. At least until I had a better understanding of what I really needed and what was available.

'And that's a good reason for me to hold off a bit longer.' I muttered half to myself.

'Oh, Marg!' The chorus faded. It was time to move onto other issues, and we all knew it was just a matter of minutes before someone raised the perennial problems of funding and managing staff. □