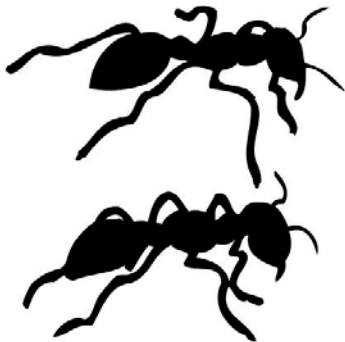


ConsultAnts.



Marching two by two, hurrah!

The teamwork of MIGHTY B2B supporters.

Troy Forrest

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Small ants.

The phone handpiece hit the cradle.

"Got 'em, YES! Beautiful piece of bowling, Bull!"

"Arrowhead? Signed up? No way!?"

Seb got out of his chair, nodding like an excited pigeon, and proceeded to murder a victory dance. It was like watching someone get a wedgie while having a seizure in the middle of a funny joke. He'd nailed a new client.

"You betcha! Oh, that's so good! We've got their new machine print stuff to start, and the multimedia will follow once those other clowns drop the ball. Who's ya Daddy... it's ya birthday..." The singing matched the butchery of the moves.

"I thought we were out of it? They wanted a bigger operation, dedicated advertising & PR, no?"

"They did! They've been burnt by small guys before!" The pelvic gyrations stopped and Seb resumed his seat. "But the big guys they spoke to, sounds like they were all too smart by half, trying to overbake the cake, telling them how to suck eggs and that they needed 42 different channels of promotion and a spend to rival Gina Rinehart's lunch money. They all took in posses of four or five to pitch, show off their size and their matching Hugo Boss wardrobes.... none of the d*ckheads really listened to the client!"

"So what won it for you? Did they say?"

"Well, that was Frank, just to tell us we're in, but we've got a proper briefing meeting on Tuesday, and I'll get the guts of it then." Seb licked the corner of his mouth as if he really was a cat and there really were remnants of cream on his chin. "But he did say they really liked the simplicity of the proposal J.W. and I put to them. He said we paid attention to the things they cared about, and that we both seemed realistic and practical... and interested. J.W.'s going to wet himself when I tell him!" He picked up the handset and started to dial, the light in his eyes ablaze.

I can see James pulling up outfront the office. Annie's at reception. Behind her, the big purple sign. "Scaffold Inc. B2B Growth Consultants." Recruitment, Training, HR, Marketing, Sales & Leadership support services. Eight partners, eight specialist ants in one busy nest.

My head starts tumbling through the possibilities for my own portfolio - how long before I could work with Seb to get these guys thinking about leadership team workshops?

Easy, Rod. Let him show the value before plating up a software upgrade.

It's going to be a great year. Guaranteed. We each decided so at our last meeting.

Scouting.

"An-nie. Rod-ney. Seb.... oop, on the phone. How are we all?"

James, shirt sans tie, moved through our guava-scented reception with purpose. A planned, purposeful dude in full consultant kit, right down to his RM's. He placed his ipad and compendium on his desk in our little bullpen and went straight for the pile of mail in his in-tray.

"Very well, thanks mate. Your morning?"

"Ahhhh....", stalling while he perused his letter pile, demonstrating the myth of multi-tasking. "Sorry, um, yes, good. Just been in with Petabyte's sales manager. Woody and I are putting together a series of personality type workshops for them, bit of MBTI, dealing with difficult customers stuff. Was an exploratory meeting. We dug a bit and found their bigger training needs lay in business planning, surprise surprise. I'll run you through it at our 4:30 sesh, but we've catalysed a conversation for you and Lucy." A letter in the pile caught his attention and I lost him again.

James and Woody (Sarah, to her clients and parents) were our training arm pigeon pair. Our consultancy crew of 8 worked in pairs across 4 specialty service areas. Beside Training, there's HR & Recruitment (Marie and Letitia), Marketing & Brand Development (Seb and J.W.) and BD & Leadership support (me and the lovely Lucy). All consultants and equity partners. An eclectic but frequently synergistic blend of experiences and skills.

"Great stuff, looking forward to hearing. Wait 'til Seb gets off the blower and ask him how he went with Arrowhead."

"No! He got it?" All of us had been conditioned by Seb to expect the worst on that one. James looked suitably impressed. "Alright! Beers on him this arvo!"

The 4:30 meeting James alluded to was a daily ritual at Scaffold. We did name it once, "Triple C" (for communicate, coordinate & collaborate), but it was too wordy and never stuck. "The 4:30" worked just fine. 15 minutes each afternoon with a quorum to share intell, update on job progress and occasionally bend an elbow. Particularly important to celebrate the wins, the one decent shot that keeps a hacker turning up and working to improve.

"I've got a scouting meeting myself in an hour. Might be something there for you, existing client with some newbies needing sales 101. A bit pre-coaching. I'll see how we go - is your online diary up to date? Might end up slotting something in there for you." We all had full visibility of each other's schedules. The technology lets you, so why not use it?

And what better gift to your partners than to book them a warmed-up meeting to grow their business.

"You're a king, Rodney. Now, coffee. Like one? You, Annie?"

Darts in the dark.

Seb hung up again. James threw a stressball at the back of his head.

"Big boy! Heard you nailed one?!"

"Yes, Jimmy, that's how you do it. Just speaking to J.W., he said it was never in doubt."

"Tosh! That's not what you've been telling us for a week!"

"It's interesting, talking it through with JDub, he reckons he can pinpoint the moment when it shifted our way. We were in a second conversation with the Arrowhead Marketing Manager, and Dubster said to him *"the moment your target audience see the ad, what do you want them to physically do?"* He reckons the light in the guy's eyes flicked on and the roleplaying he started doing in his head, with us as his advertising partners, took off like a dog who's p*ssed on an electric fence." A colourful imager, was Seb.

"Nice. I look forward to doing some training with them!" said James. We're a team, but we're all looking out for our own hides too. James held up a piece of mail he'd just opened and looked my way.

"Rod, just got a request for a quote for some training services for a big plumbing crowd, S Benders. I've never met them, no idea where they've got our details from. It's vague and generic, some OH&S training and also some customer service stuff. How the hell do I know what they need? Shooting off an answer to this'd be like throwing darts in the dark. Who puts these things together? Do they think they can get a decent provider just soliciting for lowest dollar values via mailouts to people they've never spoken to?" James was a digger because he knew it was the necessary precursor to creating bespoke solutions. He didn't do 'off the rack'.

"I don't know them either. Is there a contact person you can meet with for a briefing before submitting?"

"Yeah, some guy's name here. Bet he doesn't know half of what I'd need to know though. Man. The other thing - and this sh*ts me - it's more than likely he's just ticking a box when the deals already 95% done with an incumbent. I'm going to find out." James picked up the phone and started dialling. A digger and a fast mover, if not a mad planner.

"Hang five, James." He looked at me and put his finger on the cradle to stop the call.

"What about before you do that, we pow-wow it at 4:30 for 3 minutes? Luce, Marie and Letitia will be in, and we'll see if there's any more background we can leverage before you create the first impression."

James nodded slowly, dividing his finite attention between thinking and moving.

"Yeah, ok, good idea. Besides, I've got to get this leadership training module finished for Byzantine. They've paid up, so better give them my hours before some tyre kicker. Oh, and good work Sebalenco - go put your win on the board, ninja boy, and make sure there's beer in the fridge for 4:30."

The road to somewhere.

"Phhhhh..... I don't know. I'm not good at this goal-setting stuff. It's so.... I mean, I just need to do my job." The local BDM of a building products company, sitting opposite me in a quiet corner of Doull's coffee shop.

"I think doing your job is great and benefits lots of people... but goal setting is for *you*. Let's try reverse engineering things. Think about what you're achieving right now in your job - is it everything you want? Is there anything missing or that you'd like more of by Christmas?"

"Ummm.... I'm not sure what you mean?"

This was Dale's first coaching conversation. He struck me as a smart guy, a hard worker and, according to the boss, achieved a decent amount of success. But, like all, his industry was getting tougher and handshakes and relationships weren't going to keep cutting it. He needed focus, and the fastest way to that is goals.

"Well, one way of breaking goals down into something meaningful to you is to cover the three T's. The first T is "Treasures" - things you'd really like to have by years end. It could be a sales target, an award, a commission percentage, a market share, a prize you'll give yourself if you achieve the numbers. It might even be a piece of feedback from a client you really admire or your boss. Some words you'd like the industry to think of you by. A promotion perhaps. Something you can hold at a future time point and say "*yes, I wanted it, I did it, and it means something to me*".

"Well..... I want my budget, that's a given. Actually, my commission kicks up a gear at 110% of budget, so..." Dale started jotting notes. We'll break that one down later.

"The second T is "Time" - a time goal is deciding what you'll make sacrifices to invest some time doing each day, week or month. It's committing yourself to banking a number of hours at specific intervals to do certain activities you know are important, or that you absolutely love, or that you can see will have massive rewards for you down the track. It's your chance to pay yourself first with the only finite commodity we all have the same amount of. It means making a trade-off, cutting less important stuff. What would you like to spend some more time doing this year that you didn't last year. Think about who you'd need to spend it with and when you'd need to do it, religiously?" We talked and he jotted.

"The last T is "Trailblazing". It's an innovation goal. Some people use it to define professional development paths they want to take, or ideas they've had they want to test drive. It's a goal that's about changing things longer term, starting a project or researching or trying to build a better mousetrap. About identifying a problem in your, your businesses or your clients' world and deciding to have a go at fixing it. It's the risky one - it might fail. But it's something you're willing to having a red-hot crack at."

I could see Dale's head rolling like a paddle steamer wheel.

"Here's the challenge then Dale - I'll give you 10 minutes to quietly draft up your early thoughts, then in 2 days, you'll diarise 20 minutes to review them, decide if they're right and really meaningful, and then we start the planning."

We'll get you on the road to somewhere, mate. Much better than doing laps of the carpark.

It's 5 o'clock somewhere.

"Congratulations, Seb! That's fantastic! They're a really good account - I did some recruiting for them a few years ago, just a good culture. Longer-term thinkers. Malcolm's still there, isn't he?" Letitia, our gentle-dispositioned-but-whip-smart recruiter. The Velvet Sledgehammer, as Essendon supporter James calls her.

"Thanks Tish, yes, he is, and they asked about you actually!" Seb plopped himself into the comfy chair, opposite Letitia and Marie who shared a couch. James powered in and grabbed a seat on the fire pit periphery, and Lucy, Annie and I found spots to complete the wobbly circle. My turn to chair. 4:29pm sharp. Annie was ready to go with minutes. Eyes front time.

"OK, thanks everyone. Firstly, J.W.'s an apology, he's at a golf day with BoomBox. It's a PR schmoozer's life. Woody's still on holiday - did you all see the postcard? Riding the Kuranda railway. Trainer on a train. Boom, tish. Speaking of Tish, it's your anniversary!"

"It is! 5 years! Mark's booked us for dinner somewhere, a surprise! Can't wait - thank you for the flowers everyone, they're beautiful. And Mark's wine was too much - he's really touched." Most workplaces do birthdays. We go further.

"You're very welcome - have fun! Now, do we have a trumpet? Blow it for Seb and J.W. - Arrowhead's in!" The crew pumped Seb's tyres up and he did his best to keep the chest from puffing out too far. We were all genuinely delighted for him, not just for the fact that, as equity partners, every profitable revenue dollar lined our own investment bags. If you looked closely though, you could also see each consultant's mental cogs turning. There's leverage to be had if the creative duo in our octet get their bit right.

"OK, beyond Arrowhead, opportunities and intell from today?"

For 17 minutes, the mah jong noise of focused, passionate people that enjoyed duelling and collaborating and had a vested interest in each other's success clattered beyond our gaggle. "The Fire Pit" was our name for one of our conference rooms. It didn't have a table, just comfy chairs, couches and walls you could scribble on. Hey, we're consultants.

"Thanks all! Big day tomorrow, 6am for the walkers. Annie'll have the numbers out in the morning and we've got the next wet lab on Friday - 8 punters, I think. OK - Seb, I think it's 5 o'clock somewhere, have you come through?"

Our marketing spinner smiled and bounced up and towards the door.

"Celebration Ale's and Croser. Guava juice, Marie?"

The team get an early minute today. Extra-curricular bonding. But trust me, when you own the business, you make sure the house is always in front.

Segue signals.

Lucy and I were having a coffee and discussing when to introduce our peers to Wolfproof, our building company client.

"I've worked with all 4 of their BDM's now, Dale was the last and he started last week. You've got your first leadership team planning workshop next week. Where do you think Simon's head is?" Simon was the Managing Director of the \$23M a year business.

"He's wondering why he didn't do this a long time ago" said Lucy. "Saw an email on Tuesday, from him, cc'ing me, to the heads of departments, basically greenlighting them to contact me directly to organise any support efforts they think they need. He's a progressive guy, likes our approach, can see the ROI in future effectiveness and engagement. He gets that what we do is add a simple, consistent lubricant to help them keep their change journey smooth."

"Mmm, hmm. We've still got a few more days before all the BDM's goals come in and we can get them building and kicking off their plans, but with Dale now engaged, I'm anticipating all of them being on the upside of the motivation and early results curve over the next few weeks. What became apparent in the first conversations though was the need for some questioning skills training - they're good at forming matey relationships, but not crash hot at sorting wheat from chaff when it comes to understanding the evolving purchasing drivers and value points for big clients. Woody's questioning skills module would work beautifully and the coaching'd galvanise it."

"Yes. With the leadership team, I can see what's likely to come out of next week. When I run the "Mini-skip" session to dump their petty grievances in, I can see two of them getting bogged down in frustration with their culture of doing the footy and races with clients. So while our work will support the "work with who we have" mantra Simon's fond of, the door will open for Marie to come in and work with their HR Manager on a new hire profile paradigm."

As a multi-disciplinary team whose philosophy was to support our clients growth platform with a balanced scaffold, we looked as early as possible for signals that our peers specialist skills might help the punter. We'd defined our roles in two parts - to deliver what we know exceptionally well, and deliver our clients to our exceptional counterparts when the need was clear.

"OK, so I'll brief Woody when she's back next Tuesday and get her to draft an overview of a questioning skill module with some testimony. Then we'll coordinate a meeting with Simon, but only after you've had your leadership workshop."

"Yes. And in my one-week post-workshop follow-up with Simon and the HR lady, I'll discuss bringing in Marie for a complimentary benchmarking & spitballing chat. I'll bring it up with her at 4:30."

Conspiring for our client. If we can help, why wouldn't we tell them?

Kalamazoo.

"So Rod, what I'm after, I think, is for you to sit with my divisional managers at regular intervals, run through some of this business planning stuff, get them working on their disciplines, and they can then translate it down the line to their teams." Jenny, MD of a homewares company.

"Sure. Your leadership team's buy-in and championing of business planning and discipline checklists is vital. You've said one of the big outcomes you're after is realistic activity maps from everyone that show how you'll achieve your financial targets, yes? If I think about the sales team first, do you have a couple of coal-face sales champions that you think will be great proponents of this planning approach - people the rest look up to, that'll do well with it?"

"Ahhh, yessss..... there's Rick in Melbourne... probably Sue in Queensland.... Sue's probably next in line for the NSM throne. I want our managers to own this though. I want the efficiency of driving it through their manager and upskilling them first. Plus, it's an engagement and leadership opportunity for the managers, rather than just being delivered around the country by a consultant... no offence."

"None taken. I do understand and agree your internal leaders can and should ultimately be the guardians of this new cultural norm. I'm also conscious of the budget you've outlined to get the financial returns and sustainable practice changes right across your team. My experience Jenny is, if in synch with 'coaching the coaches' we're talking about for your line managers, we also help you get a couple of early adopters humming along at the same time, you speed up the process of uptake from the rest of the crew. Having us work with just a few peer leaders has the feel that this is less of "another management thing". You're looking for some result changes reasonably quickly, right?"

"Yes. I don't want to scare them though - they've been through a lot. If we...."

"I understand. What if we"

The "Wants" and "Needs" Kalamazoo ride of a conversation with a client whose got half the idea. They know what they want as an outcome, but confuse that with knowing what they want us to do for them. We see what they'll probably need from a process perspective but need to keep digging to check that our assumptions about their goals are correct. They push their 'want' end of the handcar down hard, I catch it at the top and then counter by bringing my needs assessment lever down gently but firmly without letting it hit their chin. Together, we keep pumping and, if we keep pumping, well, along the train tracks of a partnership we progress.

Negotiation isn't contrarian to partnerships. It's teamwork.

It's the fish they reject...

Sometimes when I watch my two recruiter colleagues conspiring, I think of the two old English Ma'ams on that TV show, *Ladette to Lady*. Not physically or because of mouth plums - they're relatively young and really nice and I don't know they care much about cutlery placement or a candidate's potential for cider-fuelled promiscuity.

They are, however, picky. That's why clients hire them.

Letitia could be considered the good cop of the pair. She has this kind of favourite aunty gimme-a-hug affect and the ability to put people at ease, make them feel like old friends in under 3 minutes. She'll ask a candidate the early questions that get them opening up like Day Lillies at first sun, melting the fear ice and exposing their personality pistils before they know what's happened. She can also deliver a cut-to-the-chase question that makes you feel like she's just asked if you want a chocolate malt milkshake.

Marie's also easily likeable, but in a straight-up-and-down way. She gets respect for her transparency, task focus and a frankness that leaves you clear on her thoughts without unnecessarily offending. She's got no tolerance for fluff and you naturally find yourself wanting to mirror her style in any conversation. It gets the information it needs in interviews.

I listen to them compare notes.

"No, he's got no demonstrated history of driving innovation beyond spitballing. No resilience to push for a change they believe in. I didn't get the sense of a willingness to think about new paths either - used the same idea example for three different questions. A one trick pony who'd throw his 2 old hobbyhorses in the ring, then when they get ignored, very quickly settle into the way things are done around there."

"My candidate has the pedigree on paper, but knowing where the client wants this role to evolve to, and the mission-critical personnel they'd be working alongside, their tendency to slip into the blame game would be cancerous within a year and at odds with the clients goals. They dropped two veiled references to the last organisation "not supporting them". Our client's culture wouldn't tolerate it. Not putting them forward."

"The last lady gave herself away - talked about what a consultative seller she is, client-focused blah blah blah, then proceeded to tell us how good she was without asking any consultative questions! Not a long term prospect."

The ladies understood what most clients pay lip service to but rarely do much about. That you can spend as much money on training and systems and strategy and plans as you like. But if you don't look closely at the potential new horse's mouth and really check the teeth before buying them for your wagon-pulling team? Then there'll never be enough carrots or whips to get you to the summit of your choosing.

Saying no is hard when you're paid on getting them to a yes. But because grown-ups don't really ever change, it's the weeding that pays longer term.

Jalan Jalan

"Nearly there - keep going, Pedro!"

A sound akin to Darth Vader having an asthma attack followed me up the last section of the summit path. The rocky ground started to flatten out and we came to a breathless stop at the sole tree atop the hill. The view of greater Adelaide below was remarkable.

"Nice work! You're getting quicker!" Pedro - Peter - couldn't answer me yet. His fingers were interlaced behind his head, a ruddy sweaty bonce looking vacantly skyward, trying to gulp any Oxygen that might be falling from above.

Just over a year ago, Seb and I started a little walking group. At first it was just the two of us, a chance to chat about business opportunities and walk off the corporate luncheons and 4:30pm beers. Then we put out a casual once-a-week invitation to anyone in our team that wanted to join us on a reasonably quick sortie up some gentle hill trails not far from our office. A good bonding thing. Then Seb invited a client to join us, and they loved it, and slowly our group expanded, and the hills that we tackled got progressively tougher. Now, on any given Tuesday or Thursday, we'll have a bunch of between 5 and 10 dinkum walkers from a roster of about 25 regulars, tackling some good gradients for between one and one-and-a-half hours. Clients only - we resist the temptation to bring friends - and it's knocked over by 7:30. We've bought branded shirts and drink bottles for them, and this year, we're entering the 100km Trailblazers event for the first time.

"Oh, man, no matter how many times we tramp it down, the hill doesn't get any flatter!" Some lighter colours were slowly returning to Peter's face. The MD for a medical device company we do a little work for. We've suggested he invite one of his paramedic clients to walk with us to offset our insurance premiums. "No acts of God or client climbing coronaries covered, so byo resuscitator, Pete!"

We didn't plan it this way (not everything's strategic), but these walks have shored up the business of some of our best clients. We made a little rule for the Scaffold team - we don't bring business up on these walks, but if the client wants to, then that's OK. But we've learnt things that no partnership review meeting in a boardroom would ever uncover. And there's something levelling about seeing someone at their most vulnerable, gasping for air, looking like they've been through the mill, that forges a bond that competitors find tough to break. And it's good for us - the mountain air's full of fresh perspectives.

"Ooof, that pasta from last night's just sitting right there", thumping his upper belly. "If I ate less and kept doing this, I tell you, I'd be ready for Rio in 6 months!"

"Don't give up your day job just yet, Pete. How's that view?" We peered out and shared one of those vistas you remember for the rest of your life. Having a gold-lined-memory-moment just feet from a key client twice a week - nice way to start the work day.

Less GR, more OW

"Yes, but the competition is 13% cheaper than us! And our customers are really price sensitive right now! And service isn't enough to convert them! And our target's gone up! And our A&P's been cut! And...."

I've heard them all.

Sitting at my desk reviewing Chelsea's last coaching session summary, the amount of time we'd spent on unchangeable whinges bothered me. Her natural bias for excuse-finding was evident early, and my role was to help her build a bite-size action path that deftly negotiated the obstacles like David Campese (or that ran straight over the top of them, like Jonah Lomu). I berated myself for not doing a better job of it on our last session - I'd indulged the wallowing on the pretext that it might be cathartic to let it all come out.

It never is. Wallowers indulged always find a way to wallow deeper.

I started sketching out tomorrow's coaching session planner.

Goals - she'd spent a lot of time paring these back as her mental excuses mounted, to the point we'd got her (barely) ticking the job description fundamentals. I could spend more time poking and questioning to get these better.... and all the while we're not moving forward. Let's go with what we've got.

Realities - overdone. Her negative scenario punches, my provoking her to think of the positive flipside... we could now write quite the treatise on why it'll be hard and what's likely to occur. Now to starve the negative of Oxygen.

Options & Opportunities - the guts of this conversation will be walking through the paydirt - who the best targets are, what'll need to happen to get them onboard, and just how many of these will need to fit into an average day for the non-negotiable continued employment tickboxes to be ticked.

Way forward. The plans, right down to nitty gritty next step phone calls, appointment bookings and pre-call planning. Some meaningful specifics for the diary aligned back up to the targets.

Less GR - she can grump and grizzle in her own time. More OW - the pain of taking excuses away and specifically defining the exertion that's bound to hurt.

My goal for her is to get a wince today - the one that comes from having a "cr&p, it really is up to me now" epiphany. I know it's the only way we'll get her to grins and greatness longer term.

Dr Bunsen Honeydew

J.W.'s sitting in the lab thumbing through papers. With his prematurely balding pate and round glasses, he's looking more like *The Muppets'* Dr Bunsen Honeydew than he'd care to believe. He catches me peering in on him.

"Hey Rod, I'm just collating the latest client survey responses and sales data for Banana Skin. The targeted mailer data's a bit weak, but when you plot the email - mailer - phone follow-up trifecta against the pre-campaign sales numbers, look at the line!" He's like a new Dad showing off his cherub.

"Looks good! When are they coming in?"

"Tomorrow. I'll work up the preso tonight, and we'll patch in a couple of their clients on Skype for some frank Q&A."

"The Lab" is one of our 3 conference rooms. Where "The Fire Pit"'s all about conversations and tossing ideas around, the lab is for research, validation and concept testing. The tech's all there - a couple of computer stations, video conferencing kit and smartboard - and in the centre, a communal bench like a wool classers table. Around the periphery, bookshelves filled with our professional library and copies of proposals and papers we've created, as well as a few comfy chairs for quiet reading. On the walls, printouts of research data, trendlines, histograms and continually updated balanced scorecards.

Our marketers Seb and J.W. use the room more than most, tracking their marketing and PR initiative's effectiveness for clients, as well as doing some small market research projects for consumer insights. Lucy and I use it as a reference library, but also to analyse post-workshop uptake of behaviours and support methods that produce a client's desired outcomes. We'll occasionally bring clients in to run them through their governance scorecards that show their implementation progress, results and compliance to their plans. Our recruiters have a personality profiling project on the go at present, testing the applicability of the more common personality indexes such as MBTI and DISC to certain corporate cultures. And our training duo of James and Woody... well, they don't use it as much as they could. We're still putting the study methodology together for what might prove to be our group's Magnum Opus. *"Hire, train, coach or systemise - what gets your business the outputs you want?"*

"Let me know if there's anything I can do. Banana Skin's MD loves good data, but he's also a repressed entrepreneur. You might keep him focused on the possibilities that can be realised by persisting with your co-developed strategy and what a platform that'll create for him to make his grander changes down the track."

"Cheers, yeah, hadn't thought of that. If you're around, jump on in. They like you."

I'm happy to play Beaker for an hour for a client this size.

The benefits of a cold

"The Origamidia sales team has a cold."

Our team all understood the meaning of this phrase.

"Set in for a season or gone by month's end?" Letitia asked.

"I think we'll see them out of it in six to eight weeks. It's an activity function. 12 months ago, I'd have anticipated a flu, but they've come a long way. The good bit is, they're not liking it. The challenge is to keep Steve focusing on Vitamin C and exercise rather than needle jabs."

A cold was our way of describing a dip in a team's performance, be it enthusiasm, effort or results. It happens to all. How long they stay sick and the impact of the malaise on the longer term results, culture and developed resilience, that's our job to influence.

"My sit down with Steve is tomorrow morning. He knew it'd come, but perhaps didn't foresee the bundle dropping of two of his rising stars. They're young, very little street-hardness, so this'll be brilliant for them longer term. As you know, he's got a bit of a "suck it up and get busy" mindset. Our conversation will be to help him get their heads back into the circle of influence quickly and, more than that, have them understanding *why*... and wanting to!"

"Yeah, he's not the most patient of guys" added James, who'd trained Steve's team on several occasions. "Agree, this'll be great for them though - some rejection antibodies, open their minds to the discipline of a daily probiotic course of activity planning."

Steve's team was suffering largely because they'd taken their foot off the activity accelerator. Some early big wins and a product the market loved had generated some fat, easy results that triggered sales discipline apathy. A viral culture of one-less-call-a-day had snuck into their practices. Now they were suffering as the lustre of a no-longer-new saleable dulled and the daily activity standards were found wanting. As consultants, we focused clients on the upside of collective ailments like this. That with the short term pain comes a team's resolve-testing moment. That it can be goal-refocusing. It provides a chance to sort wheat from chaff. It gets folk off the fence (even if it's out the door). And, used correctly, it creates the want to spark a team to pull itself out of the hollow pity party and back into contention (with some scars to remind them of the lessons).

"You go, Dr Rod!" teased Letitia. "Tissues and oranges and a 6 week course of back-to-basics.... no sick certificates doled out here! Can I be your nurse? I've got the uniform...."

Big verbs don't fly

"Sorry I'm late all. The Arrowhead briefing took longer than I thought." Seb, Country Road tie loosened and top shirt button undone, unceremoniously dumped his satchel on the floor and flopped into a chair between Lucy and Marie. 4:40pm, and we'd already covered the bulk of intel sharing.

"So? How'd it go? Did you find out why they picked you?" asked Lucy with a smile that said "I'm proud of you, colleague!" Seb raised his thick black European-heritaged eyebrows and returned the smile.

"Yeah, well, as Frank said on the phone, we were better at enunciating our solution than the rest. Sorry - start again. It's precisely because we didn't use words like 'enunciating' that made them warm to us." He reached over the table, grabbed a filled water glass and let the rest of the group hang while he quenched what was obviously a great thirst. You'd have thought he'd been out mustering cattle in the far north for 6 weeks the way he sculled. Not sitting in an air conditioned board room with coffee and biscuits for a couple of hours.

"Mmmm, better. Frank even showed me one of the other proposals. It was the most puffed-up piece of corporate bingo language I've ever seen. "Prioritised Strategic Imperatives". "Multi-faceted consumer insight leveraging initiatives". Wait, let me get this right....."Brand congruent communication platform development and evolution". Now, I can speak corporate bullsh*t with the best of them, but this was a ripper!"

A perceptive fly on the wall might have noticed every one of our consultant team, yours truly included, give a subtle gulp beneath their smiles. Big-word-itis has its own highly virulent *Consultantus Verycleverus* strain. Seb went on.

"They said the track record we come with was what got us to the table with a few competitors. The feedback from some of our best customers put our nose just in front - and they liked the diversity of the references more than the stuff we've done in their space. But what got them past their prejudice of small firms - and sealed it - was our plain spoken solutions. You know, the *"we ask the hard questions, one of us will sit with your team for two weeks to learn the ropes, we'll make ads that get your message across and gets people out of their chairs and into your shops"*... just a little raw, undressed stuff. They liked it - said it was refreshing, easy to get, and funnily enough, bold. Not overpromising, but not hiding from the results they need us to get. I think we wrote something like *"We can't make everyone love your product, but we will deliver you ads that get enough people people remembering your name, seeking you out and asking some questions."*

"Lucky your vocabulary's limited then, eh, Seb?" chirped James, who vied with me for the verbosity prize.

"Tell you what sunshine, it apparently pays to keep it simple. Remember that next time you write a dictionary of a proposal. Come see me - for a small fee, I'll strip it back for you!"

Co-developed plans

"OK, so then what do you think they'll say?"

"I think they'll say *"I want them all singing from the same hymn book, all using the same template"*.

"And, knowing how half-a-dozen of their guys feel about plans, how will we respond?"

"I think the best thing to do is pull them back to their desired outcomes - what do they want their sales team to achieve through a planning process with their customers? And then we have a chat about the differences in style of some of the crew, and how they might deliver the desired objectives with different planning approaches, and how we can help each team member tailor and implement plans to suit. But, irrespective of look, they'll all be consistent with the company values and expectations. And then we map out our mutual commitments and checkpoints."

"And if they won't budge? If they insist on one planning form for the whole group, no wiggle room?"

"Then we accept and commit to supporting their desired outcome - which then is actually 100% compliance to a process rather than staff engagement, or even, in fact, any sales results. And then we start mapping out the inclusions and limit-of-maps of our support efforts. Their planning form's not bad, it's just not engaging for all. Some will struggle to get customers wanting to help them populate it. We make sure that they understand that the goal they've insisted on us helping them achieve is in fact *team process compliance* - which of course isn't what they want, and I hope they see that quickly, but who knows? If this happens, it's because they're just confused - it's an old paradigm, and they don't know any other way yet, so they're trying to control process rather than free people up to worry about outcomes. So then we talk about helping them revise the planning process over time"

"I know. It's frustrating. I hope it doesn't come to that, but I suspect they're still in the old economy of *"tell 'em how to do their job"* rather than *"set the expectation, provide the support and free them to go write the script"*.

Lucy and I were pre-call planning a key client meeting, going through the different permutations of the conversation rally that could occur. The meeting was designed to co-develop a supplier support plan, which in turn would map out our return (revenue) over a year. The #1 topic of our support?

Helping their team co-develop business plans with *their* clients.

If we're going to sit with the client and co-develop a plan to help their team get better at planning, well...

... we better show *we've* planned for it.

Why isn't the world beating a path to my door?

We thought we were extraordinarily clever when we put our multi-pronged pitchfork of a consultancy together. Five sharp service tines - HR, Training, Marketing, Sales & Leadership. A slurpy flavour to suit any business palate. It was new, right? No-one else was offering the full pocket protector of services under one roof like us. And as equity partners, each super-clever in negotiating our specialist Scalectrix tracks, we knew we'd make an awesome and committed Justice League. With help synergies coming out of our ears and holistic bundling opportunities galore, we egged on each other's delusions, sure we'd built the ultimate mouse trap. That, as Emerson said, they'd beat a path to our door with wallets open and stars in their eyes.

Stupid clever folk. The world's full of them.

"I can't believe that Turquoise Apple chose another recruiter!"

"Man, that's depressing! Responses to my mailer? Sweet Fanny Adams. I sent nearly a hundred!"

"We've only quoted on four jobs this fortnight - four! AND I only think we'll get two of 'em!"

"I don't get it sometimes - they need us, they all tell us we do a great job, we know they all know about us... so why not more takers?"

About 10 months into our little venture, when the new kid shoes were starting looking a bit scuffed and the next NEW! FANCY! CLEVERER! wunderkinds were ribbon cutting and cork popping somewhere down the road, we collectively hit a brick wall. It was Marie, wise owl that she is, that pulled the posse in for an extraordinary chat.

"So, here it is. Our epiphany moment. Of course it was coming. Cashflow's drier than a Chilean Rose. The novelty's worn off. Turns out, the queue to try us out wasn't as long or patient as we thought. And you know what? I'm glad it's happened now. Now we can grow up. I've been thinking about this for a few weeks, and there's 3 things I think we'd all do well to remember." The crew listened attentively.

"One. If we stay super focused on delivering the paying client to their chosen happy place as fast, as well and completely and enjoyably as we can, then we'll hold our value to them... and they'll come back. Not all of them, sure, some will try the alternatives, but so what? Not even Apple or Google have 100% of their markets. We damn well better be OK with losing, 'cause we'll keep doing it.

Two. Just because we think we do great work doesn't mean we don't have to go out and keep letting people know we exist and why. They forget. They don't care on any given day. Their priority ladder has us outside the finals on most days. So? Fill the diary with conversations. Get busy asking questions and kissing babies and learning and connecting.

And three. James, I'm on a roll here, let me finish... three. Yesterday's great work isn't tomorrow's. It might not even be relevant. We're 10 months old now - our approach already has outdated fruit hanging off it. So? Time to relook at where your clients will derive the greatest value from your support in the next 3 years, and change. Yes, James, I'm done."

They're still not beating a path to our door. I don't think they ever will. Doesn't mean our stoop isn't a busy one. Just means it's usually us heading out, doing more legwork to go get the clients. Keeps you fit.

Dumps and drizzles

"I'm not sure about coaching... I mean, that's a big part of *my* job. If you deliver a great training course, I should work with the guys ongoing to make sure it sticks, right?" Reba, the state sales manager for Chloro Technology.

"Absolutely! It's why we offer both training and coaching services. I'll introduce you to Woody - sorry, "Sarah" - in a moment. She specialises in developing classroom training courses to suit B2B sales teams. Where our coaching usually comes in is as an adjunct to the line manager's support, to help them keep the team focused and implementing the training. Make sure your training investment isn't wasted." I could Reba's initial "*you're making me redundant!*" fear pausing at the intersection, thinking. Before I could ask the bridging question, she continued.

"I'm a very hands-on manager, I have a certain way I like my team to operate. I want to build their skills in handling difficult situations - price objections in particular. If we can get a common language we can keep coming back to, I think it'll stick - well, I'll make sure it sticks. And we'll see better long-term performance in our market... which just keeps getting tougher!"

"I understand - it's one of our most common training areas. If you like, I'll get Sarah to make some notes with you to understand the most common price objections you face and how you've found your most successful team members deal with them. We can show you some examples of what we could build into the training course to reinforce and supplement it. As part of our support package, we'd also help you develop a 'teacher's edition' - something to help you keep the team focused on effective negotiation behaviours longer term. This is the other place coaching fits - supporting you. Do you have a coach Reba?"

"No... a couple of mentors. My boss is very hands-off. I've been doing this a while though." Not committing, not dismissing.

"Most of the support I give experienced leaders of teams is to be a sounding board, a support person for those doling out support all day long. You can use us to preserve your focus, but also to bring other-industry practice ideas where we can. Mostly, we help busy managers cut through the noise. If there was one area of your leadership role you'd like to take to another level Reba, what would it be?"

"Ummm... look, I think, like everyone, if I can become an even better manager of time! I'm pretty good, but, you know...."

"OK. It's the area I work on with the most successful and experienced leaders, partly because they're always being asked to do more, but also because many are looking to be discipline role-models for their team. Many then have us extend the team members you think will benefit from even sharper time management practices - often your high performers." People get a certain look on their face when they're mulling. I wrapped up.

"You might decide it's a balanced plate of both training and coaching here, Reba. The way I think of the training is as a big dump of rain on the paddock - a great way to trigger germination of ideas and practices. The coaching bit which follows, be it 'coaching the coach', or helping you by coaching select individuals you think will shine with added support, is more like a constant drizzle. It's the fuel to keep the habits growing longer term. Together, you've got a powerful engagement and behaviour-changing vehicle. How about I get Sarah in and we can look at how we'd help your crew deal with price objections?"

Brushing your teeth

Lucy's got a great little 1-pager she shares with coaching clients when she's trying to get them to grasp just what a daily non-negotiable discipline is.

"Here's some things that might happen on any given work day.

You might be ill. Your children or partner might be ill.

Your dog might die. Or your goldfish.

Your chief might call a meeting and announce the business is going in a new direction.

They might resign. Or get pushed.

Your best client might go into liquidation.

It might be the day before, or after, a public holiday. Or your annual leave.

The staff kitchen dishwasher might burst a hose and flood your office.

Your car could go on the fritz. Or your laptop.

It might be a corporate golf day. Or a conference. Or a staff meeting.

Or you might just not feel like working.

Any of these things could happen, or even worse things, or a million other little things likely to get in the way of the best intentions.

On a day when any of these things happen, would you still brush your teeth?

Why?

Because it's habitual. Because it's routine. Because you know it's important and takes but a few moments and you don't like the feeling, the nagging doubt that plagues your head every time you run your tongue over your furry teeth when you've forgotten to do it.

If your teeth, whose protective enamel layer will survive a few days of non-brushing, get this level of attention on a day that goes belly-up...

... could the really important stuff?

The stuff that you know will get you to your goals?

The daily disciplines? The 2 proactive phone calls, the hand-written note, the 10-minutes planning, the self-directed learning, the plan review and reset, the 24-hour follow-ups....

Regardless of what's in the way,

why not do them anyway?"

Lucy got sick of seeing clever people treat proven disciplines as discretionary.

Success is discretionary.

Potato Tomato

"It's not coaching they need - it's TRAINING."

"I disagree. I think they know what they need to do, and we need to support their engagement and implementation."

"Bollocks! They don't know how to build a workable business plan, they don't know how to ask the hard questions, and they've precious little idea about how to structure their phone, email or written follow-ups."

"They're skilled and experienced reps - they're not perfect, but they've got runs on the board. They've got a handle on the fundamentals, and I think, on balance, working with them one-on-one to get plans mobilised while working *around* their fixed habits is going to give a better ROI, and certainly greater engagement, than running through the 11 secret herbs and spices on the whiteboard for two days!"

"But if they don't have the *knowledge*....."

Lucy and James were going toe-to-toe just before we were due to start our 4:30. One thought the client needed tomatoes. One thought potatoes. Letitia stepped in and mediated.

"Boys and girls! Your passion for your tricks is admirable, but let's be grown-up about this, shall we? What's the client's main goal here?"

"A team that can sell effectively! Which they'll develop skills for through good training!"

"No - sales results! Which they'll get by implementing plans with the skills they already have!"

"Hang on both of you - you're arguing for the same thing, just from different ends of the rope. James, I get that you don't think they've got the skills they need - does the client think they do?"

"Well, they know some of the team has skill deficiencies... some of them think they're pretty good, but if you really look at..."

"OK, pause. Lucy, have you got enough skills to work with in a coaching capacity?"

"Yes!"

"Can you see the skill deficiencies James is talking about? Could your sessions help them come to appreciate the gaps for themselves... that can then lead into a training course that they ask for *themselves*? Yes? James, isn't it better they take on support they'll embrace, that will give rise to them asking for targeted training, rather than give them training that half of them don't think they need, which might poison them from wanting any other flavour of support from us?"

James' look said he didn't like it. But he knew he wouldn't win here. And deep in the recesses of his brain a little voice was trying to shout over the hurt feelings and offended sensibilities....."*Give them what they want, and then you might get a shot at what they need...*"

Options (confused?)

My turn to chair again. Around the grounds to James.

"Cheers Rod. Lucy and I were just having a discussion about this - The Little Blue Pill Company. We've both met them, I was going to recommend training for them, but the prevailing opinion seems to be 'lead with coaching and see if any training falls out'." The bitterness was hard to coat. Lucy chimed in.

"We've agreed to start their team with some one-on-one, work with what they've got and focus them on developing and implementing plans to get some early results. Then, with some more engagement - which we think will be mixed to start - we might have them see for themselves just where the knowledge and skill gaps are, which paves a nice path for James and an array of training." The body language between the two told the story the words didn't do justice to. James hadn't let go.

"I'm still of the opinion we're doing this @rse about, Lucy. I see your perspective, but coaching incorrect or deficient behaviours only galvanises them, and you're giving the client sub-par results and aren't actually helping them become more self-sufficient with good grounding." I watched Letitia take a breath, preparing to throw her 20c-worth in, but Lucy got there first.

"I don't mean to cut your lunch here James. I agree that training will help. But if we're after engagement first, and we have to be, then I know we'll get a better hearing if we start with the more tailored approach...." James cut her off.

"Why don't we offer them the choice? Option A - training programs. Option B - coaching. Option C - combination deal, starting with either / or. Then you're really letting them be in charge - that's engaging, right?" Letitia and two others shook their heads. Lucy could fight her own fights.

"They don't want options, James. They want *outcomes*. A result. And they trust we're the experts to give them the clear one-highway roadmap. Not routes A, B or C. That just makes it *confusing*, not empowering. They want this to be easy. I think we have to be clear and unified behind what we put forward to them, and get it right right here, right now." My turn.

"OK, thank you both. Let's put the energy into the proposal. James, I agree with you, the prevailing opinion is to recommend coaching, segueing into team-realised training. Group, is that right? OK. They're an important account, the training will be there - Lucy, you'll actively seek out the opportunities and help them understand the merits of training as quickly as appropriate, yes? OK. This is for the client. If their team are engaged, and our recommendation is the one we believe will best help them achieve this, then we've got more chance of helping them. Thanks for working together on this, you two. James, other key projects tomorrow?"

To his credit, James left the decision where it was wedged in his throat and moved on, in words at least.

Whatever their reasons

I could see it. Lucy could see it. The client knew it. But it didn't matter.

"We need them to find more prospects. Get more new customers signing on per month. That's what we're being measured on. That's what they're being bonused on. Global directive."

With those words - and I felt for the client as he let them march from his lips, because he really didn't believe in them - our insights became temporarily redundant.

Head office felt they needed wider, not deeper market penetration. Who knew why? Future product releases that relied on a broad foundation? A fear of trying to ask for too much from current buyers? A better crystal ball than ours? Secrets? Because that's what they think selling is about? It wasn't really relevant - the message was clear. And, for now, they didn't give a rats about the data or our recommendation or logic that said "go deeper, not broader". For their own reasons, they needed us to help them do what they wanted to do, not what we all believed would get them the outcome they'd told us to help them achieve. To us, they were putting a process ahead of an outcome, or at least given us an outcome that wasn't the *real* outcome.

"Michael, is that what you want us to help you do? Go wider, not deeper?" I didn't give away my perplexion in my tone, but by repeating what he'd just told us, the message got through.

"I know, I know. That's what we're going to do."

Lucy and I talked about it in the car afterwards. The frustration that comes when they change gears part-way through the plan we know will get them what they said they want to get. Or when we get part stories, or an arm gets tied behind a back.

"They're the client - it's their right to be wrong, or to tie us up if they're paying us. We gave them the insight, they chose to point us away from it and help them take the stairs rather than press the elevator button... and that's our job."

"Doesn't it frustrate you though? Don't you just want to slap 'em?!"

I smirked at her and we had a professional-walls-down moment. So young and world-changing.

"I've long stopped wanting to slap every client that I think is wrong. Sometimes they're not. Regardless, the best way to get them to a happy place isn't to pull on their shirtsleeve. It's to wrap one arm around them and walk lockstep alongside in the direction of the flames, until such time as they see the danger and say stop, or it becomes apparent they had a damn good reason for going there. Think of us like Sherpas. When they really don't want the compass guidance we thought they hired us for, and instead want to cut a swathe through another terrain, then you're a luggage hauler and snake scarer. Either way, you're valuable. And hey? You learn something regardless. Here comes another case study you'll live through, and it all adds up."

Advice - giveth & taketh

The consultant smelled nervous. Young, eager, maybe out of their depth. We knew that going in. It hadn't kept the team's hackles down.

"...35% of the clients we interviewed said the number one reason they chose to invest with you was because they felt you understood their situation and you showed how your services would help them improve it. Conversely, of the 8 businesses we spoke to you that didn't take you on, 6 said they felt your services weren't as tailored to help them meet their needs as the successful tenderer. What I interpret from that is....."

Uh oh. Too quick to segue from facts to opinions. Not enough digging. I looked at their faces and guessed the inner conversations.

James. "Jumped-up little snot. Who do you think you are, *"What I interpret...."*. What would you know?"

Letitia. "Making assumptions and judgments so quickly. Why did I let Rod talk us into using this kid?"

Seb. "A lesson in the bleeding obvious. I'm getting hungry."

Marie. "I've been telling them this all along. I wonder which 6 they were?"

J.W. "Dude! If you'd only asked, I could tell you something about those 6...."

Unfair judgments maybe. As professional advice dishers, we suck at taking it. I'm heading this one off before the pass.

"Kevin, before you go on, and I'm keen to hear your insights... though the results you've described are what we'd expect... I'm keen to use your frank and fresh set of eyes. We get too close to our baby to see things objectively all the time, which is why we've brought you in. Your first impressions when you came in here and saw how we worked, how we interacted? You see a number of teams in your role - what struck you about ours?" OK, so it's a bit of a lolly, but it might open our group's ears and minds. The young consultant wasn't ready, but had a go.

"Uhh, well, it's obvious you're all very experienced and skilled at what you do. I can't talk to the calibre of your work, but client feedback was very complimentary. If anything, perhaps I'd say you look like you're trying to be all things to all people. Your business is set up to meet a lot of needs for any given client, but I've also observed you each spend the lion's share of your day - with the exception of your 4:30's - putting together proposals or talking to clients or delivering services. You can all sell, which I think is in no small part a reason for your success. I guess I just haven't yet got a great sense of longer-term strategic decision making, of planning just which sections of markets you'll dominate in a few years, and of evolving systems to grow the business beyond yourselves. You might have them, but I don't see them being referred to or refreshed continually. That mix of 'working on' versus 'working in' that I'm sure you advise your clients about all the time.... I could be wrong, but that's my first impression."

They mightn't like him, they might think he's a wet-eared punk, but he just took the sheet off the elephant.

Ship jumpers

"I think Woody wants out."

"What? Now?"

"Yeah. I had a coffee with her yesterday. This extended holiday she's taken, I think she's gotten quite used to time with the fam. I also know Pomegranate Training have been sniffing around her, and if she can get part-time with them... I just think she's having second thoughts about the level of work and commitment she's bitten off here."

James and I were bending an elbow at the rubbity around the corner from our office. His training partner Woody had extended her leave by two weeks, citing babysitting challenges during school holidays. I kind of knew something wasn't right.

"She's an equity partner, James. We all knew the caper when we signed on. If it's the hours, we can work something out."

"Yeah, I think it's more than that. The pressure, the accountability when it's your own show... I know she's worried that our biggest clients have slowed their training spends down, and while I'm OK to get out and work to drum up more opportunities, I think she's probably looking at where her life and mortgage is at, and thinking.... well, I can't speak for her, but I'm reading between the lines, and we need to look at the options."

"Well, we need to get a straight answer from her, where her thinking is. I mean, the contracts allow for us to vacate via a clear process. I'll be frank, she won't get much for her share though - we're not even 3 years in yet, we're only just gathering some momentum! All that hard work she's put into getting set up, and to go before you taste the fruits of your labour.... I hope for her sake she'll ride through this awhile. Still, it's a personal choice. Is she still planning to be back next week?"

"As far as I know. I don't know how far down the path she's gone, but as you know, there's a difference between a motivational dip and mentally checking out. Very hard to come back if you've made up your mind. If it does come to that, and I've got a gut feel it might, we've got to look at the structure of my training arm. I've been quietly sowing some seeds with a couple of talented trainers I know for nearly 12 months now..."

He was opinionated and his planning skills lacked, but under the bravado was a savvy networker who knew the value of tentacles.

"OK, well, we've got a planning meeting next Friday. Kevin's coming back to facilitate for us. It'd be great to know what she's thinking before then. I'll take another look at the contracts and have a quiet word to the lawyer, just in case. Do you want me to grab her for a cuppa this week?"

"Nah. Well, maybe. I don't want to push her, pre-empt something that might just be a funk."

I drained the last mouthful of Coopers and said "In my experience, you don't push people off fences if they're not already precariously perched. And a precarious percher is destabilising."

Bento box business plans

"We want them all to have business plans, but I'm not sure where to start. We've tried different templates before, from the long winded ones that never get used to one pagers that were too scant on detail and so never really drove good actions. What would you suggest?"

"I understand, and like you, we've seen the gamut of forms - the overbaked, the fluffy and the downright difficult to love. Do you like Japanese food?"

"Uhhhh.... yeeeeaaahh.... why?"

"Sorry for sounding random. You might've seen Bento boxes? The little take-away containers that you fill with an assortment of your favourite sushi and lunch vittles? We view business plans as Bento boxes that individuals need to fill for themselves."

"O.....K....."

"Bear with me. See, it's our experience that if an individual chooses their business plan ingredients themselves - their Bento box - with flavours and textures that appeal to them, well, they're more likely to tuck into it. They might choose to fill it with a collection of key account plans that cumulatively add up to their business target, or include a simple daily disciplines checklist that sees them prioritise the most important actions each day, or select a regular call run - daily prospecting target list combo deal... the point is, the contents, if applied properly, just has to add up to a satisfying, sustaining, goal-achieving meal. Isn't it much better to have eclectic but useful tools in the box that actually get internalised, than to have it left half full of uniform but barely touched stuff come the end of a year?"

"I suppose...."

"We'll give your crew a delectable, diverse and fresh array of tools and approaches and strategies that they can choose for their box... and they all work, if used properly. Everyone has the same size boxes - about 250 working days' worth of effort a year - but some people choose to make more efficient use of their space. Here's the thing though - whatever the team choose to put in them, well, if they can justify to you, the cashier, that their disciplined use of everything in the box will get them where you've told them they need to get, and they can fit it all into the capacity of the fixed working days? Then you need to be OK with everyone packing a different business plan lunch!"

"That's the weirdest business analogy I've heard in a while. Where does wasabi come in?"

"A little heat - pressure, challenge targets, sprints - can add to the fun. Too much - a ranting boss, unachievable goals or a heated culture? People spit it out. Same goes for pickled ginger and those little fish with soy sauce in them..."

"Weird. But memorable. Bento boxes. Let's do it."

Wrestling the sloth

Sitting at my desk, procrastinating. Considering the comfortable refuge of the email inbox. There's always enough there to let me half-fool myself into feeling like I'm working. Annie at reception looks genuinely busy. Marie's on the phone, the rest are out. Phhhhh. Rod-ney.

I know what I could be doing. SHOULD be doing.

Five calls I could put in. Three contact requests to follow up. A prospects list that's not exhausted, that needs adding to.

I should be taking a look at James' negotiation skills training client from yesterday and draft coaching options for him to show.

I've got expenses to sort and business plans to review and implement. I've even got a whiteboard to go doodle on, to get the juices flowing, the professional haemoglobin to shift potential success ideas into action steps.

I could even go give Annie the benefit of a boss who's checking in, pumping tyres, inspiring with support.

But I don't wanna. Not just now. I don't know why. My choke's not working this morning.

I own this business, for crying out loud. I *know* time and money are Siamese twins. And here I am, faffing. Stop it, stop it, stop it. Focus! What to do, what to do? What's first - a starter? Distraction stimulus deprivation, that's it. Close the email.

There. Every minute's an opportunity cost, Rod, and we've got mouths to feed and goals to kick. Goals, that's it. To the goals - on the pinboard. Yes. That's what I'm aiming for. Who's going to help me more than anyone get there? Key client #1 - where are things at? Into the CRM.... no obvious contact points beyond next week's meeting... am I ready for it? What about taking 5 minutes to do some research for them - find the next support point? Easy. Client # 2? I need to build a head of activity steam here. This afternoon I might have the mojo back, ready to tackle the strategic plan review that Kevin the keen konsultant's been poking me about. Do we really know where we want to dominate in 3 years (let alone how to get there)?

I can hear Marie getting off the phone. Don't do it, Rod. Don't engage. Head down... this is important. Chinwag can wait. You need your wheels moving first, or you'll stall. Marie's straight back on the blower. She's got what I'm striving for this morning.

Sloth's on the mat. Shoulders pinned. One..... Two..... (he's kicking, wriggling)... Thr...

Prophit

"So let's view the ultimate outcome as 'profit'. That's the beacon we have to aim for. The number 1 decision making filter here is take-home cash."

"We worship profit above all else? That's mercenary, isn't it? What about "culture", "service", "helping customers"? What about happiness and wellbeing and satisfaction?"

"Of course you're right, Tish, they're things we all want. But if we make them our apex focus, we run the risk of making decisions that push profit into the shadows, which can't happen, even for a moment."

"I think you're getting it back to front, Rod. Profit's just the thing that pays for us to survive and grow, not the ultimate endpoint."

"But that's exactly my point! If we don't have it, the house of cards falls over. It's great to be amazing service providers and creative idea implementers and have a funky fun culture. But if it's not in the aid of profit, then it doesn't last. My view is that all these things - serving and ideating and adding value - they're process elements that impact the profit outcome. Which, if we achieve it, feeds back into the circle and allows us to do more, better. But if we don't make profit the ultimate decision threshold, we run the risk of become a knitting circle sooner rather than later."

"But you're making a case for cost containment and not investing in new things that potentially might not pay off! Or things we can't put a dollar value on, like a workplace we love coming to. That we should put the bottom line first and foremost, that we don't pursue things because we can't see the cream layer just yet..."

Even as she said it, her head realigned.

"Do you see the key there Tish? You've not argued against focusing on profit. You've argued against short-term thinking. They are mutually exclusive. I agree with everything you believe in - a great work environment, investing in things that we think can help clients even if the short-term payoff isn't high. But they *have* to contribute to our overall profitability - speculative, loss leaders, whatever they are, they have to produce cream, and we have to keep reminding ourselves of it. So what it comes down to is timeframes. What's the acceptable waiting period to get the profit payoff, and how do we plan to ensure it? Have we got enough profit from our daily bread-and-butter to carry us through the waiting wilderness to get to the future profit point with our dice rolls? Everything we do as a business, every decision we make, *has* to be done with profit in mind, whether that comes in 8 hours or 8 years. It's diligent and sustainable and mature. And we have to help our clients think and plan and implement with that same recognition, with discipline, so they can enjoy and keep helping others with what profit does for *them*. And we have to help them help *their clients* think and plan and act that way..."

"I get what you're saying Rod. I'm just not comfortable with being so money-driven."

I nodded silently. James put his 20c in.

"By hell, if we're not, we won't be here very long. Then what good are we to our customers?"

Question your value

The flipside to boiling business decisions down to whether they'll generate a sufficiently positive return on investment in your chosen timeframe, is that you better be *really* sure you're feeding enough of the valuable and valued stuff into the investment hopper.

"If we're going to charge these rates, are we doing enough to make sure our clients can use and leverage our gifts? That they'll get above-and-beyond benefits? Things they'll appreciate, that *will* appreciate over time?"

"Compared to their alternatives, is our filling rich enough, our pastry flaky enough, the aftertaste zingy and pleasant and more memorable than their Plan B option could deliver? Is it filling?"

"I need to know that what I'm about to put two days' worth of sweat into will translate into a loveable, huggable fix for the client with the pain, the vision and the cash."

"Are we good enough?"

"Do we fix problems AND facilitate future goal attainment?"

"Can we make it even easier? More enjoyable? Simplify it? Put some grippier tread on its tyres?"

"Do I still love it enough to *want* to put in the grit and time needed to make our unique pearls?"

James pulled me aside immediately after our 4:30.

"I think we need to review where we're spending our time training. I'm no longer sure the client group we're targeting - and delivering to - are getting *enough* from what we're charging them for. I think we either have to change what we're giving them, or we have to pick another group to bring our show to. I need to question this, deeply, before the clients do."

"OK. That's what Kevin's here to help with. How do you want to do this?"

New car smell is addictive

"I'm keen to develop 2 new training modules. The small manufacturing sector could really benefit from some courses that...."

James was spitballing with Woody, who we still weren't sure would stick around. I stuck my beak in.

"James, how many clients do we have in that space?"

"Oh, not many - yet! I think they're being underserved by some entrenched, stodgy-thinking providers, and I reckon if we put a bit of time in here, develop some slick new sessions, there's a great opportunity..."

I find new car smell is addictive. "I'm bored with the old one - let's invent! Purchase! Find a new trail!"

"That sounds great James, but the opportunity cost you'll pay - I mean, you've spent the last couple of years really building a name training in the multinational B2B service selling space, especially in ..."

"Yeah, yeah, that's humming along, but the lion's share have done our courses now, some of them a couple of times. And there are other providers already giving them programs in these other areas.... and if we tweaked our courses for this *new* space, well, we could..."

The discipline of sticking to the old faithful crowd, of evolving for them rather than trailblazing away, or to stick with your proven value vehicles and leverage them as far down the long tail as is profitable wasn't one that sat easily with James.

"Are you sure you're better putting your energies into new products for new people - people you don't really know - as opposed to giving our existing clients more time and attention and showing how we can help them even more, either with existing or new, tailor-made stuff?"

"Yeah, I think both are important Rod! What I wanna do is..."

New car smell comes with big drive-away costs. Why not try eke as much out of the wagon you've already paid off and maximise the payoff from your patience and persistence?

"Slow down pal. One priority at a time..."

But I've heard it all before!

Adam worked the HB pencil into words on paper as he talked us through what he wanted for his team. A kinaesthetic and visual learner crystallising his own thoughts - the art was for himself.

"They need some SPARK! A reminder about what they're going to have to do to be successful this year, something that engages them, makes them *want* to be at the top of the ladder."

"Adam, you mentioned they've already done a couple of sessions on time management, on business planning their activities with the highest potential opportunities?"

"Yeah, a couple of times. I don't want them going *"yeah, but I've heard it all before!"* They'll be looking for something fresh, different - something they haven't seen before."

"What's the big outcome you're looking for from this session Adam, more than anything else?"

Pencil to paper again. "I need the curve moving this way. I need them all becoming more accountable for their results. I need them to plan better, implement better, make sure they're spending enough time with the right people. They waste too much time, play the old game too often. We *need* this result here." Tapping for effect.

I cleared my throat unconsciously.

"We can build a pretty engaging, fresh-feeling workshop Adam. One that incorporates interactivity and a few laughs and poignant thought-provoking moments. But critically, one that goes right to the heart of what you've said you're aiming to achieve. Outcomes. My suggestion though is that your team's familiarity with some planning and prioritisation concepts is also your greatest advantage. They're not starting from scratch, having to wrap their heads around new nomenclature. It's a chance to use the foundation and the power of repetition, albeit in interesting ways, to actually create some *"aha!"* moments and even better, use the power of ego and guilt in your favour. To get those in the crew that say to themselves *"man, I've heard it before - I know this! It's logical! It works! But I'm not doing it yet. It's not that hard though. Why not start now?"*"

Adam nodded and pencil tapped. "Yeahhhh... I just don't want to rehash some old chestnuts and get them thinking we're one tracked here."

"Adam, I know team engagement through colour and new stuff is in itself an important part of these gatherings, and our workshop can help you with that. But what will pay for this investment many times over is ensuring it delivers enough of the *right* activities. We're not here to entertain - we're here to catalyse actions, and quickly. Repetition's your friend here. Simple implementable activities are your friend. No rope ladders, no hot coal walking. Plans. Disciplines. Next steps. They are old chestnuts, they take people down a well-trodden success track, and damned if they don't work."

The imperfect herd

Three of the four core Scaffold Inc. services are cattle-related.
We help identify and muster the right ones for client requirements.
We school and help equip them to do the necessary job.
And we wrap an arm around them and keep talking, counselling, prodding, to keep the grass chewed and paddock fertilised.

We're structured this way because we know the greatest problems of any client are 99% cow.

"Not enough sales!"

"A revolving door culture!"

"Not enough sales!"

"Unhappy clients!"

"Not enough sales!"

"The marketplace is changing!"

"Not enough sales!"

We focus on cattle because we've seen that the collective that wants it, that's willing and able to work smartly and flexibly for it... that understands it's a herd and that's where its power lays... that can do the job needed, as well as the job that will *become* needed soon, and that loves it loves it loves it...

The herd that says "I've got this", each and every bovine bod in the building...

Of course no herd is ever perfect, but it's our job to take them a step closer. Closer to better, closer to problems solved.

The fourth pillar of our offerings - marketing and PR - are all about understanding the bigger imperfect herds with the cash and the individual milkers within them.

There's nothing we do that isn't about people. They take up 99% of our daily disciplines list.

We ask clients if theirs is really much different.

(No offence to humans, or cows, intended.)

Two by two by two

"I like the concept, James! What if you were to...."

"Yeah.... I hadn't thought about that, Tish. What I think we'd need to do would be....."

"You might also...."

"That's trickier Marie, but what we could try is..."

"Rod, how about you help James by"

"Sure. If we then added...."

"Just one watch-out from a marketing perspective,"

"Cheers Seb, I might grab you to...."

Leading is one thing. Going it alone is unnecessary. The idea genesis, the contemplation and dot-connecting and new conceptualising, sure, it often has to start solo. Then the crew can help you enrich and enlarge and concentrate it into its most leverageable valuable form. They're not always right, and you don't have to take their input. You might however acid-test your plan against a sample population view. Use them, these clever bods.

Pack animals. Even the introverts. Takes effort to collaborate though. Peers have value that can only ever be crystallised by continually seeking them out, extending an arm, asking for a dance.

"Well done all! Great meeting. Exciting projects! An exciting year ahead! You know, you work bl&&dy hard, all of you. The cold ones are on ice - JW's 2 new clients are popping in, stick around and have a yarn. Nice guys, super-smart and Luce, I think have great insights for our stuff. Tish, next week, did you want to invite...."

If the factories are, as they say, rusting, communities and symbioses just find new vehicles to realise their collective benefits. Our octet makes a living being the extra heads in corners, a scaffold to climb. I don't think this helping hand can be limited to transactions though. A two by two by two mindset is about sending out all kinds of partnership tendrils to see what'll take root, and then if we discover it'll help, watering deep.

To partnerships that work to last.

The End.

Thank you for reading – I hope you enjoyed ConsultAnts, and that you found something valuable within to help you achieve your professional goals.

If you'd like to sign up to the successor of ConsultAnts, just email troy@42mighty.com.au.

Free!

Troy Forrest, February 2013