

"No. Penalties."

To persuade the developer to put in hefty penalties? It doesn't make any sense. Then it dawns on me. It makes perfect sense.

"I see your point. If the request for proposal specifies relatively short lead times coupled with penalties, no other contractors will dare to bid. The developer will get a much higher return on his investment with much less risk, and the fast contractor will make much more profit." I smile at Johnny. "You are right after all. What contractors have now is not a win-lose, it's a lose-lose. The developers suffer from long and unreliable lead times, and the contractors suffer from a throat-cutting, price-sensitive market."

"And the contractor who realizes it can have a tremendous competitive edge," Johnny continues my thoughts. "Such a contractor could take the market while commanding good prices. The problem is that, like everybody else in projects, contractors think that they cannot do a thing to cut their lead times. The first ones to wake up will make a killing."

When Johnny leaves, I start my search for Ted's phone number.

Chapter 21

A pink note is on top of the pile in my mailbox. "Please call Mr. Brad Newbolt." And a telephone number. Who is Mr. Brad Newbolt? Probably a salesman of some kind trying to interest me in something. I put it aside. There are more pressing things to do. Jim is all over me to complete our third article in the series. Not that it matters now, but I don't like to let Jim down. I'm deeply into it when the telephone rings.

"Professor Richard Silver?"

When I respond, the voice says, "I have Mr. Newbolt for you."

"Wait," I say. What gives salespeople the guts to think that they are allowed to command other people's time? Interrupting whenever they want. "Who is Mr. Newbolt?" I demand to know.

A deep baritone answers, "I'm the president of Q.E.C."

I gulp. Charlie works for them.

"I've wanted to call you for some time," he continues. "I'm very impressed with your work. We are using it, and it works very well."

"Thank you," I say. So Charlie also implemented it. He didn't say a word about it. Did he?

"Can I invite you to give us a lecture? I mean, to the YPO."

Y . . . P . . . O . . . ? I try to decipher the acronym.

I don't have to. "YPO is the Young President's Organization," he explains. "We get together every month for dinner, a small group. Only presidents of companies. Pullman from Genemodem is in our group. We usually have a guest speaker, and we share experiences. I discussed it with the others, and we would all like, very much, to hear your ideas on projects."

I'm flabbergasted. "I'd be delighted," I politely say. Pullman? From Genemodem?

"Next Wednesday all right? A dinner talk."

"Sure."

I try to keep my head from swelling. Next Wednesday. So soon. Probably their originally scheduled, respected guest speaker canceled on them at the last minute. I'm just the fill-in. Still . . .

"I'll fax you all the details. It was a pleasure speaking with you, Professor Silver. We'll see you next Wednesday."

Before I lose my courage, I write a memo to B.J. A short memo, just saying that I'm still trying to get students to the Executive MBA program. That I'm giving a dinner talk to the YPO. And I don't forget to mention that Pullman from Genemodem will be there.

It won't help. How can it? But I don't see how it can hurt, and I'm in a really cheerful mood.

The meeting is in a private room at the Sheraton. The first person I see as I enter is B.J. Good thing I don't have castanets attached to my knees.

It's not five minutes before she succeeds in maneuvering me into a corner. "You can't imagine how many strings I had to pull in order to be here. I almost had to promise that I'd join the YPO."

She talks as if I'm the one to be blamed. Blamed for what?

"I'm counting on you to give an excellent presentation," she keeps on pressing. "Be practical. Don't talk just theory."

"What else can I talk about?"

"Of course you have to talk about the unique know-how the Executive MBA students learn in our program. But be practical. Stress how much money this know-how saves for their companies."

"But I don't know how much."

"Then talk about how much it can save them."

I was nervous before I came here. I was even more nervous when I saw B.J. But only now do I understand what real nervousness means. Thank God she leaves me. Before anybody else has a chance to corner me, I grab a waiter. No, I don't want a drink. I want to know where the toilets are.

A minute after I start my presentation, I'm cool as a cucumber. My transparencies are good. Concise and to the point. They also look good. Who would believe that I only printed the latest version at noon? Anyone who's worked with today's software.

They almost don't interrupt me. Very few questions. But they nod in the right places. They let me feel that I'm making sense, that they are with me. When I finish, they clap. More than just politely. Or maybe I fool myself?

Only when I sit down do I realize I didn't do what B.J. wanted. It wasn't on my transparencies.

Newbolt goes to the front. He formally thanks me, and then, to my surprise, he adds, "This stuff does work. We experienced it. A project that was hopelessly late is now back on track. We are now starting to manage every major project this way."

"Same here." Pullman says.

"Did you test it at Genemodem?" B.J. asks. There is no trace of surprise in her voice.

"Yes, we did. We are launching our new line two months ahead of the competition."

"That must be worth millions to your company," B.J. softly remarks.

"It helps."

Dinner is served.

Before coffee, B.J. takes over the discussion. Somehow she succeeds in causing them to feel guilty that they don't provide enough support for the university. It goes well until she starts pressing them to send more managers to the Executive MBA program.

Then it starts to backfire. They react by mocking the value of the general knowledge taught in universities. They talk about the "first year shock" and about the fact that they have to spend so much money training their already "educated" managers about what really counts.

B.J. fights back. One president talks about the fact that they do support the Executive MBA program. They pay seventy-five percent of the inflated tuition the college charges. Another president asks why the tuition for an Executive MBA is three times the tuition for the regular program.

She ducks it. Instead she claims, and proves, that they don't support their managers enough. "The two weeks they take classes in the summer they have to use their vacation time. Why? Don't you think that it helps your company for them to learn? Or maybe you think that these people, these hard-working managers who sacrifice their weekends to learn, who have to do their homework at night after work, don't need a vacation?"

They say they would do more if what was taught was more in line with things like they heard tonight.

That's all B.J. needs to hear. Masterfully she maneuvers them to agree to seriously evaluate a special track for Executive MBAs tailored to their needs. She squeezes the appointment of a committee of three presidents, or their delegates.

When we leave, she takes my arm. "Accompany me to my car. Richard, I'm afraid I grossly underestimated you. You did create a valuable piece of know-how."

It's dark outside, so she can't see me blushing. "I couldn't have done it alone," I explain. "If it weren't for Professor Fisher's new knowledge and Professor Wilson . . ."

"So you are a team. Even better."

We reach her Seville STS. One of these days I, too, will have a Cadillac.

"What do you think. Is it possible to create a full, two-year program that will bring real value? Something of the caliber they heard from you tonight?"

"I think so," I answer. I'm not just telling her what she wants to hear. Based on what I hear from Jim, Johnny and particularly from Charlene, I really think so.

"Good," she slides into her car. "I'll update Christopher. I'm counting on you to update the head of the Executive MBA program."

She takes off. I stroll to my car. The sky is full of stars.