

Chapter 1: Facing Termination?

The silence was beginning to become uncomfortable as you searched for words to answer the question from your chief executive officer (CEO). The boardroom had never looked so big, and it seemed as if her words were still echoing: “How could it get to this? You sat here telling us how this new application would dramatically improve our marketing efficiencies and customers’ repurchase frequency. It has been over two months, and the bloody thing isn’t even working!”

As you searched for the right way to respond, the events leading up to this moment flashed through your mind. It was more than two months ago when you sold the board on the benefits of a new sales force SaaS application. You had just been promoted to vice president of marketing, taking over from Tom Vecchio. Tom was an old-fashioned salesperson, with a huge personality and an incredible memory. He was employee number four when the company launched back in 1982, and he had been instrumental in its early growth via personal networking—phone calls, rounds of golf, and birthday calls. He had surrounded himself with very similar people. You understood that culture, you had been one of the young guns a few years ago, and now you had replaced the master.

But things had changed in your industry, competition was much tougher, and markets were now global. “How could a firm the size of this one run sales and marketing still just using a mess of ‘cutting edge’ Excel sheets?” you wondered once promoted. How ironic that you’d be the leader in your firm’s “digital transformation.” You had managed to never concern yourself with all that techie stuff. You were a pretty good user: e-mail, web, Word, PowerPoint, Excel, some Python you learned at school, but mostly forgot by now . . . the usual. But now your bonus depended on the performance of the whole function, not just the

number of contracts you closed, and it seemed as if you had been getting all the heat about efficiencies that they could not put on Tom . . . they could scream all they wanted—he was untouchable. But you weren’t!

It all seemed to have fallen into place when you went to the National Convention of the Sales Executives Association. At one of the booths, you had seen VelcroSoft and the sales force application VelcroSFA. There was a lot of buzz around the product both at the conference and in the press. The attendant at the booth told you about all the great features of VelcroSFA: cloud native programming, mobile integration, automated recording of information at each stage in the sales process, automated escalation and approval, contact management, lead sharing for team selling, and in-depth reporting. It could even integrate with leading human resource systems for immediate computation of commissions, reduced data entry, and increased speed.

After you returned to the office, you read some more material about VelcroSFA, looked at the online demo, and called a couple of friends who used it in their organizations. It seemed to be the right application. You showed the online demo to some of the best-performing salespeople. They did not seem impressed, and they raised a bunch of issues. Joe, one of the old-timers, said, “The Excel sheet is heavy enough, and the Rolodex did wonders for me throughout my career; what do I need this ‘cloud app’ for?” Joe never liked you anyway since you had taken Tom’s spot, you thought. Amanda, a younger associate, seemed more positive: “I’m willing to give it a shot, but it seems quite convoluted. I’m not sure I need all those functionalities.” You recall thinking that they would change their minds once they saw their commissions go up because VelcroSFA would allow them to spend more time with

customers. You liked the software more as you learned about it. They would, too.

Jenny Cantera, the IT director, had pledged her help with the integration and, after looking at the brochure, had said, “Should take a weekend to have this application running and write the interface to the HR Management system. I’m busy with the implementation of the new accounting system for the next three or four weeks, but I should be able to do this afterward.” You had some doubts about Jenny. She was very smart and technically gifted, but she was a newcomer in your firm, and she had little experience in the position.

The board had been sold pretty easily on the purchase, a relatively low monthly fee of \$175 per user, and no “computer stuff” to buy. You had used the return-on-investment (ROI) calculations provided by VelcroSoft that included things like the initial investment for moving to the cloud, the cost of migration, and support. Granted, VelcroSoft personnel were very aggressive with assumptions underlying their calculations, but with a bit of effort on everyone’s part, you truly believed you could achieve strong results. As soon as you got the go-ahead, you contacted the vendor and obtained the setup instructions and interface specifications to seamlessly integrate with the HR Management system. Everything had gone perfectly up to that point, but your fortune seemed to turn right after.

First, you had the administrator package on your desk for more than a month. Jenny was running into unexpected trouble with the legacy accounting application. This thing has been

running since the early 1990s you chuckled, when are these guys gonna follow me into the digital era? Once she finally got around to integrating your product, she took one weekend to complete the migration, and finally created the user accounts. The interface to the HR application was not operational yet—something about an “Apex JSON” malfunctioning... which you did not quite understand. However, you pressed on. Over the following week, you had encouraged your sales rep to “play around with the applications.” You had even sent an e-mail with the subject line “Up and running in the brave new world of digital salesforce!” But the response had been cool at best. Only a few accounts had been accessed, only one mobile app installed, and overall, the people you spoke to said they were too busy and would look at the software once the quarter closed.

Last weekend, when Jenny wrote the interface to the HR Management systems, all hell broke loose. On Monday (yesterday), the HR database was locked, and the HR Management system was down. Apparently, the wrong sequence in the data migration procedures resulted in the reinitialization of the HR database... or so Jenny says. She was now scrambling to bring it back up, and saying she might have to reinstall the legacy HR software application. She had already removed VelcroSFA, and at this point, it looked like the application would not be a priority for a while. You did not really mind; you had bigger fish to fry . . . you were concerned about getting fired.

Discussion Questions

1. Who do you think is to blame for the current state of affairs?
2. What do you think is the most critical mistake you made over the last two months? What were the principal mistakes made by others involved?
3. How could these mistakes have been avoided, if at all?
4. Should you take this opportunity to say good-bye to everyone and resign now? If not, what should you say in response to the CEO’s question?