

Challenge the Boss or Stand Down?

Thomas Green winced as he reread an e-mail message from his new boss, Frank Davis, marketing director for the travel and hospitality group at D7 Displays. “Tom, this week’s client meetings went well, but they would have gone better if you had been on top of the market data. When you’re on your own, I expect you to be better prepared. It’s essential for your new responsibilities in developing market strategies for your region.”

Tom looked up from his paper-strewn desk and glumly surveyed the view from his new 29th-floor office in downtown Boston. Just a few months ago he was the company’s fastest-rising star, promoted, he thought, to bring fresh thinking to the firm’s self-service kiosk business. He’d catapulted from account executive to his new position as a senior marketing specialist, bypassing colleagues and collecting a 50% raise. And hardly six weeks later, he was being lectured — again — about how to win a sale. Unless he could get a handle on his new boss, Tom figured he’d be lucky to make it to his one-year anniversary.

A single rap on the door snapped Tom from his reverie. Frank Davis immediately let himself in.

“Taking a break, Tom?”

“No, Frank,” Tom replied coolly. “I was thinking through my kiosk-services development project. If we can’t get new offerings out there soon, we won’t be able to compete in this business. I know you’re not a fan of the project, but . . .”

“Did you read my e-mail?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And?”

“And, yes, I will prepare better.”

“Good,” Frank said. “And, Tom, I need you to put your skunk works project on hold. The market-strategy meeting is next week, and I still haven’t seen your plan, which was due yesterday. That is your one and only priority right now. Capisce?”

“Understood,” Tom said wearily.

The Tricky Fast Track

D7 Displays, launched in 1990 as an ATM provider, now dominated the self-service kiosk business. With 1,500 self-check-in stations in 75 airports, the firm had sewn up 60% of the air-carrier market and was making inroads into hotels and car rental agencies. Tom had joined the company just a year before, at age 28, and he immediately

set about getting noticed. Within weeks he had secured a contract with a major airline to accelerate kiosk rollout in 20 airports and buy software upgrades across their locations. He'd also worked the back channels to get the ear of his division's software-development director and push his ideas about new service offerings — an unorthodox move that ruffled some midlevel feathers but got senior management's attention.

It was clear to Tom that for the kiosk business to compete with web-based check-in services, increasing penetration wasn't enough. Kiosks had to offer unique advantages to both customers and clients—for example, digital advertising displayed on screens while kiosks are not in use and cross-selling opportunities such as links to travel partners whose services fit the check-in passenger's profile.

At a training session in Boston, Tom hit it off with Shannon McDonald, the division vice president. Both were University of Georgia alums, and McDonald, sensing his potential, made an effort to get to know him. Tom, for his part, instantly realized that McDonald could be his ticket to the fast track. When a senior marketing specialist position opened up for the Eastern North America region, he pounced. During the ensuing month, he made multiple trips to McDonald at headquarters and outlined the client opportunities he saw and his strategies for winning them. She offered him the job over dinner.

Tom vividly remembered that evening. He and McDonald had appeared to see eye-to-eye on the company's imminent challenges. But he particularly recalled her words of caution, which in retrospect seemed especially ominous.

"Tom, you're ambitious and creative," she'd begun, solemnly. "This group needs a fresh perspective, and I'm willing to take a chance with you. But you'll have to learn quickly. You don't have managerial experience, and while you've nailed your sales roles, this position requires you to think strategically as well as tactically — and to work across layers of management. I expect you to seek guidance from some of our seasoned managers."

Tom had assured McDonald that he'd do his best, and he was taken aback by her response.

"I'm sure you will, Tom, but you're walking into a tricky situation with Frank. He has very aggressive growth goals for next year — maybe more than the market data warrant. You'll have to manage that. He'd also expected to choose the new senior marketing specialist—and he would not have chosen you." She paused. "I need you to do better than your best."

Um, That Went Well

By the time Tom found the strategy-planning meeting, the rest of the 12-person senior sales and marketing team had already assembled. Catching his breath, he squeezed in at the long oval table, planting his iPad before him.

“Glad you could make it, Tom” Frank began. After a deliberate pause, he continued. “Welcome, everyone. We’ll be reviewing sales projections for the coming year, performance expectations for the senior marketing specialists and their teams, and overall strategy for meeting those. We’ve realized a 10% CAGR over the past five years, and corporate expects this division to continue to be a growth engine. Before I walk through the detailed analysis, let me give you the executive summary.” Frank projected a slide showing a U.S. map with each of the company’s five sales regions. “Given the market opportunities in the Eastern region, Tom and his team will have the most-aggressive growth targets — 15% for the airline, hotel, and car rental markets combined. Next, the South-Central region...”

“Frank?” Tom interrupted. “There’s no way we can achieve double-digit growth this year.”

“Excuse me?” Frank responded, astonished. The room was silent.

“It can’t be done with our current offerings. I was with clients in New York, Atlanta, and Orlando last week. Airline kiosks represent a mature, saturated market. The airlines are hurting, and they’re flocking to competing web-based check-in and asking why they should keep buying an outmoded product that’s expensive to install and maintain. Web services do the same thing but cheaper.”

Frank took a deep breath. “Tom, most of our revenues come from the airlines market. But hotels and car rental agencies are wide open: 15% and 5% of revenues, respectively. As we’ve discussed,” Frank continued, enunciating each word, “you’ll be pushing into those markets. That’s where the growth will be.”

Tom spun his iPad so that everyone could see it. “Before the meeting I checked in through this web service for my flight this afternoon to DC. It was almost too easy. It doesn’t require hardware installation, maintenance, or expensive proprietary-software upgrades. The only way our kiosks can compete is for us to develop kiosk-based services that generate revenues for clients or offer other benefits web services can’t. The writing’s on the wall.”

“Tom,” Frank interjected, “I don’t seem to be getting through. Our client airlines have invested heavily in our kiosk hardware and infrastructure. They won’t just pull the plug. If you turn your attention to developing market strategy, you could put kiosks in every hotel and car rental agency in your region.”

Tom hesitated but couldn’t contain his frustration. “Actually, Frank, I’ve been out there talking with prospects and clients. A lot. Those industries have nothing like the appetite that airlines had in the early years. Hotels are high-touch services: Customers want a human, not a kiosk. Car rental companies need no more than a few kiosks, even at high-volume airports. You’re comparing apples and oranges.”

Silence. At last, Frank spoke. “As I said, Tom’s growth target for the Eastern region for next year is 15%. Now, does anyone object to moving on to South Central? Good.”

And That Went Even Better

Tom poked his head in Frank's door. "You wanted to see me?" He knew what was coming. From day one, he'd felt like Frank was out to get him. Yes, sometimes Tom liked to shoot from the hip, but that style had helped him land some big accounts. Unfortunately, it roiled Frank.

"Have a seat, Tom." Tom dropped into a low leather chair facing Frank's desk. "I have just e-mailed Shannon McDonald and cc'ed you. Your performance at today's meeting was way out of line. If you ever publicly challenge me again, I'll do more than send an e-mail. But the problem is bigger than bad manners. This job requires more than your sales smarts. You're thinking like a lone-gun account executive when you should be focusing on regional strategy development, teamwork, and clear communications up and down the chain of command. It's not just your attitude; it's your entire outlook."

Frank handed Tom a copy of the e-mail he'd sent to McDonald. "This memo details your shortcomings—and corrective measures for them." Skimming, Tom caught phrases like "poor judgment" and "questionable behavior."

"Tom, I'm going to keep closer tabs on you. You'll inform me of your detailed plans and update me on your schedule on a daily basis. I found out from one of your account execs that you were in New York when I thought you were in Atlanta..."

"But I was going to tell you!" Tom interjected. "I finished my Atlanta client meetings early and was able to get time with the software VP at IndiZm in New York to discuss new kiosk services. It's part of the software-development project."

"Yes, but you're off that project now. Your Outlook calendar said you were in Atlanta, and I got shunted to your voicemail when I called. From now on, you'll update Outlook daily and return messages from the office promptly. Also, I will need to see your specific client-communications strategies before your sales calls, and to review all sales collateral in advance. You will stop making client calls purely to meet people. You'll produce materials I request on deadline. Finally, you'll have a more positive attitude both inside and outside the company."

"I don't have a bad attitude," Tom objected. "I'm trying to develop our offerings so that web services don't eat us for lunch. Five years ago, only about half of U.S. leisure passengers used web check-in. Do you know what the figure is today?"

Frank narrowed his eyes. "Yes, I'm aware of web competition, Tom. I've been doing this for 20 years. As I said, the airlines won't throw their big investments in hardware out the window, trust me. Next year's growth is in expanding our penetration of the hotel and car rental markets, and that's where you'll focus. After you've made progress there, we can talk about your software project. End of discussion."

As Tom headed down the hall to his office, he muttered under his breath, "I don't think so."

Heck of an Outlook

Tom laid low for the rest of the week and considered his options. The lull in Frank's criticism gave him a dim hope that the worst was over. As Tom scanned his Outlook calendar and gloomily considered updating it, he spotted an alarming new e-mail in the queue. It was from Shannon McDonald. cc: Frank Davis. Subject: Performance.

"Frank Davis has explained to me his point of view on your performance," the message began. "I think all of us want to improve the current regrettable situation. Frank has articulated his expectations for your improvement over the next 30 days, after which he and I will re-evaluate your continued suitability for the position. At this point, I would like to get your ideas about how you can improve your performance. Please send a statement in writing within 48 hours so that we can resolve this issue promptly."

As Tom merged his E82 coupe onto I-93 and headed for his new condo in North Andover, it seemed unwise to have bought a car and house so soon. Frank wasn't merely whining about Tom's style; he appeared to be building a by-the-book case for firing him.

Tom could envision only two scenarios for staying with the company: (1) Do as he was told, change his style to suit Frank's agenda, and execute on a strategy he believed was flawed; or (2) expose the full extent of Frank's dubious projections and strategy to McDonald, his original sponsor, and hope she'd rescue and redeploy him.

As Tom fought his way through the rush-hour traffic, he kept coming back to the only thing that was certain: It was a hell of a time to be out of work.

Q: How should Tom respond to Frank's demands?