Who’s Training Whom?

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Todd was at his desk staring at the Grand Mesa when he reflected on the HR Department’s training session on workplace violence that had just ended. His thoughts went back to a bizarre incident that he had encountered nearly forty years ago. The shocking conversation was still clear in his mind as it was his first exposure to potential workplace violence.

“I can kill a person silently in seven different ways,” new salesman Sam declared without emotion.

By contrast, Todd was alarmed to the point of nearly driving his four-year-old 1969 Opel Kadett into the ditch as he turned his head too long to examine his passenger for outward signs of menace. Seeing none, he calmed himself sufficiently to steer back into the driving lane of I-25 while he wondered how in the world that could have been Sam’s most logical answer to Todd’s conversation opener, “I don’t know you very well, Sam. Tell me something about yourself.” His second thought was that they were only twenty minutes into their two-hour drive to Trinidad, the first leg of a busy three-day business trip, and that no one would be at the office for another hour and a half. Therefore, Todd would notbe able to call anyone to see if this was some sort of joke, assuming he could find a roadside telephone.

Todd’s next thoughts turned to his mission, which was to help this new salesman become better at his job. Maybe Sam had let slip the key to helping him. Deciding to match Sam’s level of calmness, Todd forced out, “And where did you come by those skills?”

“In Nam.” Sam didn’t seem to mind Todd’s question. “It was Cambodia actually. S’pose I can tell you that now that it’s over. Spent most of my days in Viet Cong’s tunnels.”

“You were Army, weren’t you?” Todd began to relax a little, as Sam seemed to treat him as a confident.

“Army Intelligence. That’s why I was trained in those …, what d’ya call ‘em … oh ya, ‘skills.’” (consider revising) Sam chuckled at that notion.

Todd was hoping that the conversation would turn lighter so he took the opportunity to try to shift the topic. He strained to remember something positive about this salesman of six months, whom he was supposed to train by example, despite only being in the sales force for a couple years himself. Todd was the rising star of the Colorado Springs branch and appreciated that the branch manager had enough faith in him to help out with this “new-be” who needed a lot of polish. His thoughts landed on something he thought he knew about Sam. “So, you have a wife and a new baby daughter?”

“Had. Actually, it soon will be ‘had.’” (consider revising)

“Really? I don’t mean to mettle, but do you want to talk about it?”

“Not much to say really. I woke up a couple nights ago on top of my wife on the floor next to the bed with my knife at her throat.” Sam’s voice was as flat-lined as before, and the only movement he made was to brace himself as Todd swerved back into the driving lane once again. “So, I left ‘em and moved into a motel room last night. Love ‘em too much to risk hurting them.”

“Wow,” was all that Todd could muster as he made a mental note to get separate rooms at the motel tonight.

“It’s no big deal. Most of us full-time tunnel rats wind up this way. I met with a shrink at the V.A. hospital. He said some of his colleagues are starting to call it ‘post-traumatic stress disorder.’”

“Does the Veteran’s Administration offer any help?”

“They’re trying to start a new program for it, but not much funding yet. You might have heard that we Viet Nam vets aren’t very popular.” To Todd’s surprise, Sam smiled at that. “But I’ve been a bummer in this conversation. So, let me help you out here. Listen, I know why I’m on this trip with you. You’re supposed to help me become a better salesman, and I appreciate that. I’m just not sure I have what it takes to sell mainframe computers. From what I hear, it takes living with a prospect for months before you close the deal. That might get just as ugly as the situation with my wife. But I’m willing to give it a try. So, what else do you want to know?”

Todd was relieved by Sam’s candor. It was good that the air was now clear between them. “Well, Sam, I’m supposed to help you with the way you dress.”

“What’s wrong with the way I dress?” Sam was justifiably defensive.

“Sorry if I dived in too quickly. Please remember I’m supposed to help.”

“I guess what I’ve heard about you is true.”

It was Todd’s turn to be defensive. “Like what?”

“Like, you get results because you get to the point quickly.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. So, back to your attire: Why leisure suits? We’re supposed to dress in business suits like the bankers and board directors that we call on. Even in my rural territory, when I’m not calling on bankers, I wear a sports coat and a tie. You ought to save the leisure suits for the dance floor after work.”

“But the bell-bottomed trousers of my leisure suits fit better over my boots.”

“Okay, so that’s another problem: Why engineer boots instead of dress shoes?

Sam pulled up his pant leg. “That’s where I keep this.” The six-inch knife blade glinted in the morning sun as Sam retrieved it from its holster. “Hey, would mind keeping this little car on the road. Don’t think it would protect us much if we hit a fence post.”

This time, instead of easing back into the driving lane, Todd pulled over. “You mind if I look at that baby?” Sam flipped the knife so he was holding the handle and surprisingly he handed it to Todd, who quickly reached to the floor to his left, popped the trunk lid, opened the door, jumped out, deposited the weapon in the trunk, slammed the lid, squeezed back into the driver’s seat, and accelerated into the traffic lane.

“Wha’d’ya do that for?”

“Don’t think you have a right to carry a large knife concealed without a permit.”

“How do you know I don’t have a permit?”

Todd stared into Sam’s eyes and set his jaw. “I doubt if you do. But it doesn’t matter. This is my territory so we play by my rules.”

“I can’t go into a strange location without being able to defend myself.”

“You’ll be safe enough. Our first sales call is at Trinidad City Hall. The Chief of Police will be in the meeting. But I can’t risk what might happen if he got a glance of the lump in your boot. I really don’t care if you spend the night in jail. However, qualified prospects with money are too few and far between. I can’t afford to lose one at this stage of the game.”

Sam laughed out loud. “Guess you told me. Is that my first lesson, Old Guru?”

“Looks like it will be a trip full of lessons.”

Now, forty years later, Todd was amazed at how he handled that situation with Sam and wondered aloud, “Would I have even been in the car with Sam if the company knew then what it knows now about workplace violence and post-traumatic stress disorder. I wonder how ol’ Sam is doing nowadays.”