**The Client That Stole Christmas**

Chewing a large bite of turkey sandwich, Kristen Hammersmith pressed her palms together behind her back, relishing the series of cracks and pops between her shoulders. It had been a long year, and she’d spent too much of it hunched over this desk. She believed that Driscoll did important work—building reliable, if expensive, software for businesses whose systems couldn’t afford to fail—but it could be stressful. Sometimes she had nightmares about a bug in the Driscoll system that operated airplane landing gear.

The past few months had seen more turmoil than usual. Kristen’s boss, Alessandra Sandoval, had decamped to set up her own business as a technical consultant. The move had come as a relief, because Alessandra and Tim, the unit head, didn’t exactly mesh. Tim was a classic software geek—methodical, khaki-clad, and, unless you were cracking jokes about binary code, fairly reserved. He had been visibly uncomfortable with Alessandra’s almost hackeresque persona: her sarcastic sense of humor, visible tattoos, and odd hours. Her Vespa was more likely to be in the company lot at 9:00 PM than at 9:00 AM. She could find bugs faster than anyone else in the company, but a reorg had left her reporting to Tim, and six months later she had announced she was leaving.

Tim had responded by promoting his next-best programmer—Kristen—to fill the position. And although Kristen was excited by the opportunity to be a manager, things had not gone as smoothly as she’d hoped. Alessandra’s chartreuse cowboy boots had turned out to be very tough to fill.

Kristen was looking forward to a week off between Christmas and New Year’s—with her mother doing all the cooking—as a much-needed chance to unwind. Most of her team was taking time off, too. *So not a creature will be BlackBerrying,* she thought with quiet glee. She took another bite of sandwich just as Tim poked his head around her cubicle wall.

“Kristen, I’m sorry to interrupt your lunch,” he said, “but I need a quick word with you.”

“Mmkay.” She grabbed her notebook, hastily swallowed, and followed him back to his office.

Tim closed the door. “Remember Hybara Casinos?” he asked.

“Of course,” she replied. “One of our biggest customers, until they decided last year that our software was too expensive.”

“Well, they’d like to come back. Effective immediately.”

This should have been good news, but Tim didn’t sound pleased. “What’s the catch?” Kristen said.

Tim leaned back against his desk and folded his arms across his chest. “Their new cheapo setup has been crashing, and the lost revenue is more than what they would have paid Driscoll for a system that doesn’t fail. When it goes down, the slot machines don’t work, the staff can’t make or access any hotel reservations—everything basically comes to a standstill. Even the bartenders rely on the system to keep track of the high rollers’ favorite cocktails. Hybara is understandably upset, and wants the problem fixed in time to make a clean start in the new year.”

He paused, and Kristen finished the thought for him: “Which is only two weeks away.”

“You’ve seen our numbers this year,” he said baldly. “People have a hard time investing in expensive systems in this economic climate. Driscoll needs this revenue.” Tim usually displayed all the emotion of a mouse pad; Kristen was startled by his intensity now.

“And I’m assuming they want the bells and whistles they’re accustomed to?” she said. “Meaning someone has to show up in person at their Barcelona headquarters?”

She’d meant it as a question, but Tim merely put on a grateful smile and moved to open his office door. “Thanks, Kristen. I knew you’d see the urgency.”

“Wait a minute, Tim,” Kristen said. “You told them *yes*? This type of project would normally take us six weeks! You told them we could do it in *two*?”

“Kristen,” he replied gravely, “Hybara is crucial to us. I’m counting on you and your team to deliver. I’m sorry about the timing, but it is what it is. I know it’s asking a lot, but without this revenue we may be looking at staff reductions next year.”

Kristen tried to keep her voice even. “Given the timing, someone will have to be in Spain over the holidays—in all likelihood, on Christmas Day. Plus, most of my team—including me—has vacation plans. What do I tell them?”

“This is going to be one of your first big challenges as the new team manager. Be clear, and be firm. Tell them that company policy is *always* that vacations are subject to business needs. I have faith in you, Kristen—that’s why I promoted you. Please get back to me by the end of the day.”

He opened the door, and Kristen knew the discussion was over. She returned to her cube and her now-soggy sandwich, her appetite gone.

**Pro and Con**

Tim sat down slowly at his desk. Although he’d told Kristen he had faith in her, he was deeply concerned about handing a project of this magnitude over to a rookie—especially a rookie who hadn’t yet shown any ability to effectively lead her team.

He hated to admit it, but this was just the sort of situation he’d worried about when Alessandra decided to leave. Her programming style was infuriating—no safeguards, no process, just her “intuition”—and her ego was grating, but the team had responded to Alessandra’s rebel-with-a-laptop style. As far as he could tell, they hadn’t yet responded to Kristen’s.

He gazed thoughtfully at the phone, seriously tempted to call Alessandra. He had no doubt that her consulting fees were astronomical, and bringing her in would mean swallowing his pride—not to mention losing face in front of his superiors at Driscoll. Still, Alessandra knew Hybara’s team and systems better than anyone still with the company. And she was fluent in Spanish. Having someone parachute in who literally spoke the client’s language would probably go a long way.

But his turning to Alessandra might threaten Kristen’s chances of ever gaining her team’s respect. She’d been in the role only about two months, and even if her management skills had so far failed to materialize, he still considered her a high potential. In August, for instance, when the software that ran the Buenos Aires stock exchange had crashed, Kristen had gotten it back up and running, though she’d had to cut short her vacation to do it. She was still very young—she’d joined Driscoll right out of college, four years before—and had consistently excelled.

Heaving a sigh, he decided it was something to think about over lunch. With the kind of day he’d been having so far, it would have to be something hot and greasy.

**The Bearer of Bad News**

Kristen sat cross-legged in her desk chair, resisting the urge to spring into frantic action.

The snow seemed to fall upward toward the white sky as it blew in eddies against the window. She allowed herself a few moments to gaze at it and wallow. This wasn’t the first time something like this had happened—her stint in Buenos Aires leaped to mind. But then she’d been content to help. Alessandra had a gift for getting people on board. She’d made Kristen feel that she was pitching in on a project that mattered not just to Driscoll’s balance sheet but to the wider world. Somehow, rescuing a stock exchange seemed more urgent than rescuing a chain of casinos that couldn’t get their slots working—especially if Christmas had to be canceled to do it.

She pulled up Hybara’s file. *Getting a six-week project done in two weeks—without sacrificing quality? Insane.*

**Getting a six-week project done in two weeks? Insane.**

A few minutes later, Kristen closed her laptop and stood up. Tim had told her to strong-arm her team members about their vacations, but she felt she should keep her word. She’d given them permission to take the time off. She had become friends with Grahame and Veronica in the days when the three of them were together in the programming trenches, and Grahame had been talking about his trip to New Zealand for months. Veronica’s in-laws were super-demanding. Kristen couldn’t just parrot some company line about the vacation policy.

She peeked over the gray cubicle divider. Her team members were all sitting at their desks. “Guys?” she said. All six of them looked up. “Let’s go into 102 and chat.”

They filed into the conference room, a couple of them comparing their futile attempts to get this year’s hot holiday toy: a video game that let you play Led Zeppelin songs as different members of the band.

“My eight-year-old just asked me what a ‘stairway to heaven’ is,” Veronica was saying, “and wants to know if Santa will bring her one for Christmas.”

“And you said?” Grahame replied with a smile.

“I said that song is about the escalators at the Hopedale Mall, because there’s a Cinnabon right at the top of them, which is her idea of heaven.”

The team laughed, but Kristen cleared her throat. “So, we’re in a bit of a pickle,” she began. She took a deep breath. “Hybara Casinos wants to return to the fold, so to speak, and Driscoll has agreed to get them set up with a new system by the end of the year.”

She tried to drive the point home with eye contact, but glanced away quickly as the incredulous faces turned to her. “I know that’s only two weeks away,” she continued. “But I think we can do it if we all pull together. I’ve already cut two weeks out of the project plan by eliminating the time we usually bake in for scoping. We know Hybara’s needs pretty well, so this should be just an upgrade. Fingers crossed. I’m hoping you guys can suggest more ways to tighten up the timeline. I’ll need those suggestions by the close of business today.”

Six grave faces stared back at her. No one spoke.

“Now, I know you guys have holiday plans already in the works, including a couple of you who have made vacation requests.”

Grahame interrupted. “Requests that *you* approved.”

“Yes…that’s right,” Kristen said, looking down at the table. “I’m hoping that when you get back to me with your suggestions, you can let me know what your constraints are. We’ll try to work around them, but—I’m really sorry—I can’t make any promises. I know we’re asking a lot, but this is very important to the company. Thanks, guys.”

As they left the room, Kristen saw Grahame and Veronica exchange a significant look. *What’s that supposed to mean?* she thought. *Tim said be clear and firm, and I was clear and firm!* On the way back to her desk she found herself, not for the first time, wishing she could just work on software.

**Who You Gonna Call?**

It was 7:00 PM, and Tim’s windows looked out into darkness. The snow had stopped a couple of hours earlier. Half of a cold meatball sub sat on his desk, and the other half was playing havoc with his insides. He still hadn’t heard from Kristen—but he had talked briefly with Alessandra. It had been awkward, but she’d given him a quote. Her services would cost $400 an hour—far more than he’d imagined. He wouldn’t be surprised if she’d jacked her price up just for him. But she was willing to fly to Barcelona, and she sounded confident that she could ram the project through. He’d said he would think it over and call her back. “Well, think fast,” she’d replied, and he could almost hear her triumphant smile through the phone. “My schedule fills up quickly.”

**Alessandra’s services would cost $400 an hour—far more than Tim had imagined.**

Just then his computer pinged, and he turned to see a message from Kristen titled “Hybara situation”:

*Tim, sorry not to get back to you sooner. I’ve spoken with my team about Hybara—was definitely firm, and clear!—but we seem to be at an impasse. Grahame Binkle had some great suggestions about how to trim the project timeline down further, but he has nonrefundable tickets to New Zealand and says he can’t change them. Veronica Matthews also pointed out some good ways to tighten the schedule, but her entire extended family is descending on Christmas Eve, and she won’t be able to come in either. The other four are willing to work, but I’m not sure we can meet the deadline without all six people chipping in.*

*I’m heading out now, but was wondering—do you think Hybara would take the upgrade any later?*

Tim stepped out of his office, pulling on his gloves, in time to see Kristen wrapping a thick plaid scarf around her neck.

“Walking to the subway?” he inquired. When she nodded, he said, “Me, too. Let’s walk and talk.”

He waited until they were outside the building and shuffling through the ankle-deep snow before asking her how the meeting had gone.

“Good,” she replied. “I think. It’s just too bad about the timing. Do you think Hybara would give us three weeks instead of two?”

“Kristen,” he said, ignoring her question, “do you think your team members still consider you as, you know, one of them? Or are they starting to see you as someone they need to listen to?”

She thought about Veronica and Grahame, and the look they’d exchanged after the meeting—not to mention their refusal to help over the holidays. How would Alessandra have handled that? Would she have gotten them to pitch in, vacation plans or no? Kristen hadn’t the faintest idea. But she didn’t want to admit that to Tim. Instead, she said, “Tim, let me answer your question with a question. Why do you ask?”

Tim knew it was time for him to make a decision. He just didn’t know how to choose.

Should Tim take a chance on his rookie?

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Let’s begin at the end: Tim should hire Alessandra—immediately. Period.

Kristen is in completely over her head. Accomplishing the designated task, while not impossible, is thoroughly unrealistic given the constraints. Neither Kristen nor her team is being set up for success.

By contrast, this challenge plays directly to Alessandra’s strengths and flexibility. She’ll be paid a lot of money to do what she does best. Ideally, a couple of Kristen’s team members will be assigned to her, so that they can learn both the guts of the Hybara system and how best to pull off a high-stress systems development. Alessandra has a decent shot at delivering; Kristen has barely a Christmas prayer.

Answering this question is so easy that it raises a larger, far more important one: Why on earth is Tim O’Connell a senior manager? Almost everything we know about him and his choices reveals a manager who doesn’t lead and a leader who doesn’t manage. His presumptuousness is horrible and—worse yet—unprofessional.

**Tim is a manager who doesn’t lead and a leader who doesn’t manage.**

But before detailing how Tim and his bosses have shockingly mismanaged themselves and their circumstances, I must confess to some sympathy for and identification with Tim. Like him, I am not a “people person.” My natural inclination—like (apparently) Tim’s—is to focus on the task at hand rather than on people’s feelings and fears.

However, that is precisely why I know that I must make a special effort to demonstrate my personal and professional respect for others, and that I should also have the good grace and self-awareness to lead by example. Successful leaders know that their actions speak louder than their words.

What are Tim’s actions? The most awful element in this scenario is not that this ill-conceived, poorly defined development effort will ruin everyone’s holidays. It’s that Tim has neither said nor done anything to show that he is prepared to lead by example. What standard of professionalism is he setting for Kristen and her team? As best I can tell, the man isn’t rolling up his sleeves and pitching in; he’s maneuvering like a trapped rat to delegate the very problem he himself volunteered to solve. I had a boss like that once. He didn’t last a year. He wasn’t fired; the company bumped him back to his core competence—writing code. As surely as great salespeople aren’t necessarily good sales managers, talented programmers frequently make horrid managerial mentors and motivators.

Frankly, I’m shocked that the company’s alarm bells didn’t ring loud and clear the minute Alessandra gave notice. If talented people leave because they have genuinely better opportunities elsewhere, that’s one thing. If they leave because they can’t get along with the boss, only to turn around and bail him out, what does that say about the boss?

For the record, Tim was also unprofessionally disrespectful in accepting the Hybara plea without consulting his people or his superiors. If I were Tim’s boss—and he’s lucky I’m not—I’d be appalled not only by the commitment he made to a big client but by his Hobson’s choice: an untested rookie and her unhappy team or an expensive, talented employee who got fed up working on staff for us. That I didn’t know how Tim himself was going to participate in reaching a solution would also upset me.

Kristen may have terrific potential as a manager, or she may be a gutless wuss who is afraid of playing Scrooge to her team members—that’s not the core concern here. What I know for sure is that I wouldn’t want her definition of leading by example to come from Tim.

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Tim’s management style is the reason people leave companies. If he stays on his current course, he’ll spend most of his time trying to replace lost employees. He isn’t malicious; he simply isn’t doing his job.

Tim doesn’t know whether Kristen is ready because he hasn’t made managing a priority. His job isn’t to produce software; it’s to build an organization that can produce software. The distinction is not subtle. Focused entirely on deliverables, he has left his team to find its own way. Had he communicated more productively with Kristen after her promotion, Driscoll would be much better positioned to seize this opportunity.

In his defense, Tim is undoubtedly expected to both manage and perform a technical role. Alternating between those roles is inherently difficult, rarely discussed, and even more rarely taught. For most people, the technical role predominates; it’s more familiar and its short-term rewards are seductive. The consequences are insidious: People leave, productivity stagnates, motivation wanes.

Tim must now maximize his chances of completing this project and minimize his chances of having no staff to do the next one. To begin his course correction, he should assure Kristen that she is not alone and suggest that they both think overnight about what resources will be needed and then meet early the next morning.

Here’s a next-day scenario: Tim tells Kristen that he has great confidence in her but realizes that he hasn’t fully prepared her to handle the situation. He apologizes for dumping the issue on her the day before and commits to working with her. He jokes that they can use this opportunity to begin making up for all the time they haven’t spent together in the past two months. They share their ideas. Tim then sketches out available resources and budgets and tells Kristen that he swallowed his pride and called Alessandra: If Kristen thinks that Alessandra would be useful, she is available. Then Tim asks Kristen if she’d like to lead the effort, with him as support.

Tim’s goal is to have Kristen willingly own the project rather than feel that it has been thrust upon her. Only then will she be truly committed to it. By asking, he’s not ceding his own power—he’s teaching her how to seize hers. If Kristen declines the opportunity to lead, Tim can go ahead and hire Alessandra.

If Kristen steps up, Tim prepares her to succeed: He defines success and asks her to draw up an action plan. They agree to quick daily meetings. Kristen will own these meetings and will outline priorities, strategies, and progress. She will also give Tim assignments, since he has assured her that he’s there to help. Tim can observe Kristen’s thinking more closely than ever and as a result offer insightful coaching. Perhaps for the first time, he will be managing outcomes and people.

Kristen revisits the opportunity with her team. This time she outlines a clear plan and explains how she’ll complement their efforts with contracted help. She engages Alessandra to handle specific tasks. Kristen’s genuine excitement about regaining this client comes across to her team members: They see a boss who’s been entrusted with a critical opportunity and is realistic about what it will take. Now those who can make sacrifices are energized to do so.

**If Tim continues to navigate from crisis to crisis, the costs will keep increasing.**

This project will be completed. At what cost? If Tim balances his focus between deliverables and people, the organizational stress will have been worth it. If he continues to navigate from crisis to crisis, the costs will keep increasing. Great crisis managers spend lots of time interviewing new job candidates.

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In a situation like this—the return of a “lost” customer opportunity—it’s natural to focus on winning back the business, especially if you have invested heavily in your previous relationship with the client. The impulse to say yes and get people working immediately, as Tim seems ready to do, can be overwhelming. However, that reaction must be countered by a broader assessment of the implications of seizing this opportunity, both for the customer and for your own company—including, ultimately, your company’s reputation.

The question Tim should ask is: Will taking up this opportunity be the right thing for the client and the right thing for my business?

He owes it both to Driscoll and to Hybara to go back and engage in a frank conversation about expectations and potential risks. With a time frame that’s being compressed by some 60%, both parties should reassess their goals: (1) What can they realistically accomplish? (2) What are the risks involved in trying to rush the project, and how can they be mitigated? (3) What are the cost implications of 1 and 2? Given the material change in time frame, scope, and risk, it would not be unreasonable for Driscoll to submit an updated cost estimate to Hybara, especially if external consultants must be hired.

**What are the risks—and the costs—of trying to rush the project?**

If Hybara and Driscoll can get on the same page and agree on what success looks like, Tim will have to build a team that he trusts. Will he assign Kristen, his “rookie,” to lead it; will he turn the project over to Alessandra; or will he lead the team himself?

I assume that Kristen wouldn’t be in a management role if she weren’t capable, given that she was promoted internally. The fact that this crisis has come at the beginning of her tenure is not the issue. Every manager has a first crisis, whether it’s three days or three years after assuming the role.

I would encourage Tim to let Kristen lead, but only if he can commit to the additional investment he must make to support her throughout the project. He also needs to realize that she must be visibly recognized as the leader; day-to-day decisions and communication must go through her. Anything else would undermine her inside the company and in front of the client. This is a test for Tim as well as for her.

One of the challenges in managing Hybara’s expectations will be clear communication, which becomes even more difficult under tight deadlines. In multinational projects, I’ve learned that it’s important to have someone who can not only speak the language but also help each side understand the business processes and cultural norms of the other. In this case it would be tempting to engage Alessandra as a consultant, because she is familiar with Hybara. But neither Tim nor Kristen can afford a loose cannon. Kristen would have to decide whether she could structure the project to mitigate previous tensions between Tim and Alessandra. If she finds that the conflict was related to unethical or unprofessional conduct on Alessandra’s part, she has no choice but to explore other options, such as local business partners with related domain knowledge and language skills.

To summarize: Tim needs to reestablish clear goals and success criteria before formally accepting the project; build a strong team that he trusts and can rely on to deliver within the compressed time line; and empower the new team leader to make decisions and lead the project.