Memoirs of a Self-Loathing IT Professional

By Bernie Wieser

Talking to Executives

When I was at university I went through the *software engineering program.* It taught me how to organize my work into a bigger picture and then break it down into smaller achievable chunks. The program also covered topics outside the box of programming. These topics were much more valuable to business. Many of my classmates had no interest in these because they were not *coding*. The topics ventured into business process design, organizational design, and the things you needed to be successful to build software that actually did what end users wanted and needed.

The tech doesn't matter at all if the environment in which the business operates isn't nurturing or conducive to success. Management consultants call this the *corporate culture.* Supposed experts use various analogies to describe building a winning business. For example, some compare it to a skyscraper with blueprints and a good foundation. Others compare it to a sailing ship with captain and crew each doing their part to move it forward. Skyscrapers are built from the bottom up. A ship is led from the top down. Somewhere in the middle of these analogies the beliefs and values need to be aligned. Those values are sometimes bestowed by leaders with a vision. Unfortunately often there is no vision that builds a community and fosters people's motivation. Many organizations grow from a few highly motivated, focused and interdependent people into a behemoth of silos and specialities managed by executive's expectations.

When I started at Banana Energy Corporation I thought success factors were in play. On my desk there was a beautiful little book called *The Banana Constitution*. It had fine pastel

artwork that usually depicted people working together to achieve a common goal. Every page had a motivational quote followed by executive expectations in fine print.   It was like concentrated common sense of how everyone could happily work together to make Banana the best energy company in the world.

The section that really gave me warm fuzzies was about communication. *Everyone* in Banana was encouraged to talk to everyone else, including the most senior leadership. The constitution made a point of saying that anyone can bring issues up with the executive. There was an image of what looked to be an executive lifted up by a variety of types of workers. I really liked this idea because executives are people too. I had no fear of them. The fact that they made 8 digit salaries compared to my 5 didn't factor into my equations of self-preservation. However they did need to earn my respect.

I never liked chain-of-command institutions because they weren't aligned with my ideology. I had some crazy notion that people should be judged on their merit, not on their position within the hierarchy. Maybe it had something to do with being a reformed computer hacker. Organizational controls were like copy protection. When I was a kid I had more fun *breaking games* than playing them. I couldn't stand that idea of some nameless person telling me what I couldn't do. Unfortunately being good with computers also led to grander ego. I made a lot of false friends who were my friends because of what I could do: *crack* them more *free* software - the five finger discount kind without the thrill of taking it off the shelf and smuggling it out the door under a jacket. They liked me for what I could do for them, not for who I was.

But the constitution matched my ideology in many ways. It let me believe that executives were interested in what I had to say. It used language like meritocracy, open communication, and community. So with my training on designing big software projects, and knowledge of all the processes and procedures required to make it happen painlessly, all based on successful companies that had done it for decades, I felt it was my place to write an email message to Aubrey Wilson, Chief Executive Officer of Banana, explaining how IT could do what it did better and how this model could be expanded to the entire organization (because so much of it really had nothing to do with IT.)

My letter was compelling and persuasive, at least to me. I likened what was happening in IT in-house software development to a war and developers were the soldiers in the trenches. I wrote things like *you cannot win a beachhead with a series of random assaults*, and *military history shows precision and success through consistent application of methodology reinforced by training and drills.* These were keys to making operations fluid. I made several back references to the constitution. I think I impressed him because I received a response inviting me to a fifteen minute meeting. *Wow*, I thought, *I will have an opportunity to tell Mr. Wilson how to improve Banana.* I wasn't looking for praise. I didn't expect a promotion. I just wanted to be helpful.

Mr. Wilson's office was two floors up from mine. The entire floor housed the executive and it looked as what you would expect of executive offices with many meeting rooms, lots of artwork, some aboriginal paraphernalia like a head dress with eagle feathers gifted for some great deal on Indian land. The front receptionist was one of the friendliest people I had met, offering me coffee or magazines, and chatting with me incessantly. When it was my time to go back I met Mr. Wilson's personal secretary who was slightly less friendly but also offered me beverages. And when it was my time, I ventured into the corner office and there was Aubrey wearing a golf shirt and Dockers with his feet up on his desk. He was an older man, balding but in excellent shape.   There were photos of him running the Boston marathon and more than a few trophies and racing bibs with numbers.

"Hi Jack, please sit down," he said as he sat up more professionally.

"Thank you sir," I said politely, "My name is Mark."

"Ok Mark," he said as he leaned forward a bit and put his hands together like in a prayer. "Thank you for taking the time to write me. I always like to hear from staff because as you understand it can be hard for me to talk to everyone." His eyes were fixed on me. I could feel an unusual sense of focus.   "When I wrote the constitution I didn't have the full backing of the executive, but I did have the backing of the board. It's all about social responsibility these days. And given our growth from a small exploration company of 20 people to this energy leader of 5000 staff in four countries on three continents, it hasn't always gone according to plan, even when there was a plan."

"I understand sir," I said.

"Now it concerns me that our IT department isn't running as well as it could, but I am *not* the guy to help you here," Aubrey stated. "I've forwarded your note to Chuck Florez, our Chief Information Officer. He can probably help you."

"Thanks," I said, puzzled that the CEO of Banana had called me in to tell me that he was sending me to someone else. "I sent you the note because I thought I could make some suggestions on how to improve Banana…" I started as Aubrey interrupted me.

"Yes I know but we have some very good people working on those issues right now. People who have been working in the energy industry for twenty or more years," he said with a big smile on his face. "Now - right now I'm working on a deal to get us out of Venezuela. Five years ago I believed that we could do good work down there and help the Venezuelan people: give some of them jobs and bring them closer to our interests. But you know what happened?" he asked me.

"No sir," I replied.

"A bunch of guys with machine guns took our guys and facility hostage, demanding we hand over the facility to their control. We paid for pretty good security and those folks that we were trying to help were the same folks that opened the gates to let in the guys with the guns," he said as he slapped his hand on the desk. "And now the board is all pissed off with me because I was the guy who had some noble idea to go help out some third world backwater and grow our capacity at the same time."

"I think it was a good idea," I said.

"So did I Jack," he said as he got up. "Now I'm pretty busy but I appreciate you coming to see me." He gestured towards the door and then held his hand towards me. "I told Chuck to expect you so book a meeting through his secretary Joan when you can," he said as I got up and shook his hand. "You can do the right things for the right reasons and still fail," he said with a wink. I thanked him again and left his office.

It took me a few days but I booked a meeting with Chuck Florez via his secretary. When I met Chuck he went on about how process improvement in IT was not in Banana's interest because it was not *core competency*. He mentioned that he was in negotiations with one of the bigger IT companies to umbrella-outsource Banana's IT operations. "We want to be like a holding company," he said. "We'll hire or buy companies that already have best practices developed. It would take too long to build this capability in-house." There were a few other examples he provided, like *Banana doesn't own any of its own drilling rigs, we use third party vendors and service providers. That is the norm.*

During the meeting I came to the conclusion that Mr. Florez wasn't interested in anything I had to say. He never asked me a question. He never referred to my email. He didn't really look at me. He was telling me how it was. The only reason he spoke to me was because *his boss* delegated the *issue* to him. Good bosses delegate. When I was leaving Mr. Florez's office I said, "Thanks for your time, if you have any questions for me or if there is anything I can do to help, I'd like to." Mr. Florez just smiled.

A few days after that I had my regular status meeting with my boss, Anne Hanser. I mentioned that I had talked with Mr. Florez about process improvement.

"You did what?!" she exclaimed.

"I sent a note to Mr. Wilson with some ideas and he sent me to Mr. Florez," I said.

"What? Who told you to do that?" she asked in disbelief.

"I did it on my own volition," I said. "I thought I could be helpful in improving how we do some of our development."

"Let me get this right," Anne said, slightly red-faced, "you told my boss's boss's boss *and* his boss how to do their jobs? You thought this was a good idea? Why on Earth would you think that?"

I shrunk down a bit in the chair and said, "The constitution said that it was expected of all staff to communicate openly about how to improve the business. I thought I could provide some ideas."

"Mark," Anne started with a stern tone, "you are a contractor here hired to do what I tell you to do. You were not hired to solve the company's problems. The fact that you went over my head truly disappoints me. And now I need to worry about if you pissed off one of my bosses. Do what you are here to do. No more. No less. Now get out."

I felt my admonishment was deserved. Anne was right. I likely came off to Florez as some idealistic, know-it-all kid out of school telling him how to do his job. I did not understand why CEO Wilson even bothered to reply to my message, let alone call me in for a meeting. I had to talk with the oracles in the corner office on my floor. Aside from the shock, mocking and amusement at my stupidity on relaying my story, only Jeff could sum up the lesson for me like no one else.

"Mark," Jeff said shaking his head, "the corporate constitution wasn't written by anyone who actually *works* here. *Bread and circuses…*"

So there was my big lesson: *don't believe everything you read.* Company propaganda is simply that. It is an attempt by senior leadership to affect an attitude. Workers who *believe* they are empowered and can talk to the senior leadership feel better about themselves and their relationships within the company. *Bread and circuses:* creating approval through diversion. The reality was that I was naïve enough to be the first and likely only person to *act* on those beliefs and to take the executive up on their offer of conversation.