Memoirs of a Self-Loathing IT Professional

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Downturn

The global economy crashed. North American manufacturing slowed and so did the demand for oil and gas. With a high oil price, a lot of companies bet on natural gas being the next, cheap energy source. Gas companies thought liquefied natural gas was going to be huge and everyone was going to modify their vehicles to burn it. Then, the United States was seeking energy independence, so there was a lot of investment in what folks called *unconventional resource plays* (like coal-bed methane and shale fracturing). The natural gas taps were turned on.

But the price of oil slipped below the magic $100 a barrel mark. The price of natural gas went into the toilet because of oversupply. With cheap oil, suddenly alternative and unconventional energy didn't seem too attractive to investors as they were no longer cost effective. Stock in alternate energy companies became worthless, and unconventional plays got cancelled or put on hold.

As Banana Energy Corporation was an integrated energy company, it produced both oil and natural gas. The company planned for aggressive growth, counting on a high price of oil and a big demand for natural gas in new markets. So the energy downturn caught Banana overleveraged and unprepared. The senior leadership decided to try a few things differently. Big projects were cancelled, but this wouldn't stop the bleeding of an organization that had staffed-up for big ambition. As the human resources cost is one of the biggest costs to any organization, middle management was asked to trim its workforce spend by 10%. For many groups this meant letting people go, and the advice from HR was to try and retire some of the older workers. However, middle management thought it best to let the more junior staff go; there were more of them. It was a very strange time, where some managers ended up with one direct report, and in other cases managers had no reports under them to manage (nor do the actual work).

The company also started the Innovation Challenge. The point of this initiative was to solicit really good ideas from the staff about ways to save money through innovation. If there was a new technology or business process improvement that had cumulative savings potential, the executive wanted to hear about it. It backfired because senior leadership didn't anticipate how small a percentage of the workforce actually knew something about the company's operations. The two most common suggestions were to remove bottled water and pop and get rid of the coffee machines. Management followed up on the suggestions only to see staff spending more time out-of-office at the local coffee shops and convenience stores. Depriving IT folks of caffeine was a particularly bad idea as the entire IT organization became edgy, grouchy, and/or dozy. Some folks went so far into withdrawal that they brought in their espresso machines from home. A few even became the unofficial barista for their floor.

IT made up roughly 25% of Banana's total workforce and two thirds of them were contractors. These contractors were already spread pretty thin so IT management directed *no new hires and no new contracts*. Chuck Florez, the Chief Information Officer, wasn't sure what to do. His outsourcing idea was proceeding slowly. He had offered up a few, big pilot projects to an umbrella service provider only to have them fail miserably. Not only did they fail, but they caused a lot of discord amongst the long standing staff. There was an *us-versus-them* attitude that only became more entrenched when it got around that the high priced umbrella consultants were gathering and reporting intelligence on *all* aspects of Banana's business back to their masters. Finding new work within the organization seemed to garner more of their attention than succeeding with the projects they were there to do. There were rumours that some projects were intentionally being drawn out or mismanaged in order to prove how feeble Banana's IT organization was, and make outsourcing the obvious alternative.

Some details of Chuck's plan began to filter out to the IT staff. A full outsource deal promised a 10% total cost reduction in the first year. Of course this was accomplished by laying-off and/or packaging IT employees. But Chuck couldn't justify outsourcing in the current climate. Frustrated with the lack of savings Chuck did the next best thing; he told IT middle management to ask all of their contractors to take a 10% pay cut. Few of us complained publically because the job market was depressed. Those that did complain saw a 100% reduction in hours. When your contract says you get paid by the hour, eliminating hours is a novel way to get out of a contract without breaking it.

Banana's regional offices had their own idea of how to fix the IT spend problem: decentralize most of the IT functions and eliminate the corporate IT groups. Many of the regions had their own IT staff anyway, so this was a convenient argument to keep the embedded, local IT staff while obviating the disconnected corporate staff. Chuck and his leadership fought the idea vigorously. It was a hard fight because home office wasn't the group pulling product out of the ground to make money – they were pure cash burn. The field IT silos had the support of their operations superintendents. In the end Chuck won, and it started a new dawn of centralization. Field IT was to become one with the body corporate. Redundant IT systems and processes became the focus for elimination and with them redundant staff. However a cast of corporate IT workers also got the axe: the developers that built in-house applications, and the desktop support power-users that assembled office productivity solutions. Neither were not *core* to Chuck's plan.

IT Directive 182 went into effect. *Thou shalt buy before partner, and partner before build.* Building software was the last resort because it was not a core competency. This was in line with a previous conversation I had with Chuck about possible IT process improvements. I thought the conversation was over because of the way he dismissed me. I also promised Anne I would not approach senior leadership again with any more good ideas. I didn't even submit any ideas into the Innovation Challenge, though I *knew* many of the process improvements I learned about in school could save Banana millions of dollars over time. However, I thought some tiny seed must have been planted in Chuck's mind because I received a meeting request from Abena Chioma; the director of IT strategy and planning. The meeting subject was simply *process improvement,* and the message *let's grab coffee*. If Abena scheduled it, I wasn't breaking my promise to Anne by going. I decided not to tell Anne about the meeting and accepted the invite out of insatiable curiosity and a desire to offer an opinion (if so asked for one.)

When I met Abena at the downstairs cafe I was taken by her perfect posture. She was an older woman, dark and striking. However the meeting was not what I expected. The first 15 minutes of our discussion was about our backgrounds, or should I say Abena's background. She took most of that time to deliver a long list of companies she'd worked for and some of her major accomplishments. It almost felt like an interview, where I was the one interviewing. But when it came time to discuss process improvement, she simply wanted to know about the email I sent Chuck. Chuck had forwarded it to her to deal with. *The problem* had been delegated yet again.

"So you think you like working for a large energy corporation?" she asked me.

"It wasn't quite what I expected," I replied honestly. "In school I had learned so much about current best practice – it was just strange to see so few of those processes employed here."

"Not so strange," Abena started, "this company grew from the merger of several smaller companies and small companies don't have a lot of process. Small shops are driven by the tenacity of their people. Banana is very good at execution, partially because there are not many processes, but mostly because of the people executing."

"Well, if a company gets to a certain size, there is logistical overhead that can be solved with processes," I said. "Processes need to be repeatable, and if you do them right, anyone can do them."

"True enough, but you cannot change anything here." She paused and looked at me as if anticipating some emphatic response. I was silent. Shortly she asked, "How does this make you feel?"

I was surprised by the question. I had never been asked how I felt about *not* being able to change something, except perhaps in my interview when I was asked *what would you do if you had a disagreement with your boss about how to do something and he told you to do it his way,* *anyway*. "Hmmm, not too good I suppose, I believe people need to be empowered to do their best."

"So if you are not empowered to change anything, would you like it?" she asked.

"No," I replied quickly. I strongly disliked the idea of not being able to modify how I approached my work.

"Well if you don't like it, you should quit," she said with a straight face.

I paused, looking at her, feeling slightly awkward. *What do I say to that?* I thought.

"You are empowered to do *what* is in your control, no?" she asked.

"It's not so much *what*, but *how*," I replied.

That allowed me to change the topic back to process improvement and ask about the Innovation Challenge and IT's role. Abena went on for a bit about how IT was only a tiny blip on the executive radar, and since the executive was the group reviewing all the improvement ideas, they probably wouldn't understand or value comments that weren't directly related to oil and gas production. She told me that Chuck was whipping boy for the executive, in a thankless position, providing an undervalued service viewed as a necessary evil. "You know Chuck doesn't even get his picture taken with the other C-levels," Abena told me before departing. "He's not invited to the table. I don't think that some of them know what he does."

I liked Abena and I didn't feel bad for talking to her as she gave me some perspective. I also started to feel a bit sorry for Chuck. Chuck was also a computer scientist; he had gotten into Banana when it was a 50 person company. He managed to survive all the acquisitions and reorganizations, and managed to become a leader through the constant change and reinvention. That must not have been easy.

Shortly after my meeting with Abena we got news of organizational changes within IT services. We were not allowed to buy any new systems unless they were identified as critical and were replacing multiple older ones. Every project had to prove value. The guidance on what projects were acceptable would be provided by our new Project Management Office (PMO) under the leadership of Alan Chang. I still saw Alan from time to time, usually when he was on his way to some social-club event or another.

Another control added to the mix was the newborn Enterprise Architecture (EA) team, a group that reported directly into the senior IT leadership, with the intentions of forward thinking and facilitated strategic planning. Architecture's first, big mandate was to implement a software and systems inventory. This would help with the rationalization and consolidation of technology used throughout Banana's organization. Jointly the PMO and EA groups would review all projects and performance, give their guidance, and strongly voice their objections if some rogue project didn't fit into their plan. They didn't have the authority to say no to the business, but they could make the environment within IT hostile enough that no one was willing to work on those projects.

I met the dudes for coffee to discuss some of the recent happenings. The coffee chats helped me process events, but because of the increased volume of Banana staff at various locales, sometimes it was hard to talk without looking over your shoulder. It was also getting harder to find a place to sit down, but we managed to find a somewhat cozy spot without many other Banana people around.

"You heard who the new lead of enterprise architecture is?" Jeff asked sardonically.

"No," I replied. "Who is the lucky person?"

"Your friend Paul Barton," Jeff said with an evil grin.

My back stiffened. I had not forgotten Paul turning me in to IT security. I didn't trust him. Having Paul in a position of authority where he could *just say no* for no good reason troubled me.

"How did that happen?" I asked. I took a hit of caffeine.

"The web server and UNIX teams got eliminated. I heard they're getting co-sourced. Leadership didn't want to lose Paul, so they offered him the full time EA gig," Jeff replied.

Todd looked like he had something important to say, but there was something he needed to do first. Todd was a tea drinker and he had let us know previously he was somewhat miffed at the disappearance of *all* caffeinated beverages. He slowly poured his teapot of hot water over the bag in his cup. "They weren't the only ones disbanded. My friend Sue from the productivity group called me. She got let go, and her clients are very upset. One client in finance is so upset he offered her a job in the business as an advisor. Apparently finance can't live without support for their spreadsheets."

"I think a few people will be annoyed by that decision," Jeff said. "Productivity built a lot of stuff for a lot of people. Their clients loved them."

"Her big gripe is that *she helps people*. She can't understand why a group that actually helps is going away. So now if a business client calls about Microsoft Office, their first and last stop is the help desk," Todd said. His tea had steeped just the right amount of time, so he took out the bag and had a sip. Upstairs, he brought in specialty teas from home because we still had access to boiling water via the kitchen sinks. Tea was his ritual.

"The help desk is no help at all," I added. "Those guys answer the phone and follow scripts. My clients call me directly because they get so frustrated."

"I think I overheard Anne say she expects us to pick up the slack and offer our help to clients; but we're not supposed to bill for it," Todd said shaking his head.

"Wow, freebies. And we had to take a pay cut. So what else are we supposed to do?" I asked.

Jeff raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure," he said, "but I heard that a lot of work is heading our way. Business likes Anne's *client service is job one* attitude. She is shuffling around work and what gets billed to what cost center. Some of the stuff I'm working on has no budget, but the client wants it now, so she told me to bill to completely unrelated projects."

"Creative accounting is never a good thing," Todd responded, having another sip of his tea.

“Well, I for one like to get paid,” I said. “I need to work an extra hour to make up for the 10% cut.”

“Or do what I do,” Jeff said with a smile, “round your hours up.”

“I’m not sure I’m completely comfortable with that,” I said. “It feels dishonest.”

“Listen - if banks, merchants, and the taxman do it, it must be okay,” Jeff laughed. Todd just shrugged when I looked at him and sipped his tea. “Besides,” Jeff said, “with the economy the way it is, and the silly pass-the-buck cost pressure management is putting on us, I’m sure more than a few people will be *challenged* and *innovative* with their math.”

I tried to take Jeff’s advice, but I found it difficult to be too lackadaisical in my accounting. It didn’t help that I saved my time reporting until end-of-day Fridays, which was about the same time my mother telephoned to check in with me (that incidentally left me in a more pious, moral and honest mindset.) That Friday was a particularly fun conversation with mother, because in-between trying to explain my cut in pay and new coffee tax, I had to explain that the price of gasoline had nothing to do with natural gas prices as gasoline is made from oil.