

Chapter 4 – The Business Program

So if I had a couple degrees, what was I doing cleaning floors for a living? Good question. I wasn't always so career-challenged.

Oh, hell, yes I was. Career-challenged. So always.

In my final year of my first degree, I was hired, as many English Lit students were, to be a marker for Comm101. It was a course that had a lot of written assignments, and it was a course intended for students who couldn't write. An interesting arrangement.

After the third or fourth set of assignments, I was no longer given batches to mark. It avoided the hassle of firing me. The professor of the course said she had received several written complaints about my marking, most of which were disturbing to read.

"So don't read them," I told her. Duh.

One student had complained about one of my comments: beside his sentence, "He was a sick man," I had written, "Avoid redundancy."

Another said he had a problem with my attitude, pointing to my "Hey Shit-for-Brains, use a capital letter at the beginning of a sentence!" remark.

Yet another accused me of being "prejudist" when I said that even Business students should learn how to spell. "That's what secretaries are for," he added. "But how will you no if there doing a good job?" I wrote back.

Apart from being shallow, narrow-minded, selfish, and materialistic, business students just aren't very smart. (And yet, they're the ones who are trained to be our supervisors. Another interesting arrangement.) Consider their understanding of profit and loss. I was enlightened on this matter one night at the campus pub. (A couple of my track-mates were Business students, and they had invited me over to their table while I was waiting to shoot some pool. So it was that I became a semi-regular at their table.) (They didn't know I marked their papers.) It was just an ordinary pub night, not the Business Society Pub Night, so they weren't all dressed up as pigs and trying to drink beer through two straws shoved up their nose.

Shouting over the music and pouring myself a glass from one of the many available pitchers, I had asked the table at large, "Why is profit good?"

No one said, "Because it gives me pleasure, it makes me happy, I wanna be a rich sonuvabitch."

Instead, Tom, a serious student and the first to buy an attaché case, said, "Profit is good because it enables you to expand: to hire more people, to establish branches in other cities, to increase production."

"And why is this expansion good?" I asked.

"Well, because then you can make more profit."

"Can you say 'circular'?"

There was a pause in the conversation.

"What?"

"Profit is the purpose of business!" Dick proclaimed with his beer mug. "Why else would you go into business?" He was genuinely puzzled. And a vice-president-in-progress.

"Yeah, we have a right to maximize our profit!" Harry added with passion.

"On what basis do you have that right?" I asked. "And doesn't it trump, oh, I don't know, the right to food, water, and shelter?" There was another pause.

"What?"

"We have a responsibility to maximize our profit – a responsibility to our shareholders," Tom went for the A+ again.

"Can you say 'pass-the-buck'? What?"

There was another pause. With compound interest.

"Look," Tom was patient with me – after all, artsy fartsies aren't likely to understand this – "if someone invests in your company, giving you money to use, you have an obligation to give them the best return on their money."

"The best?" I repeated. "Why the best? Why not set a fair rate of return, and then include that as an expense, rather like the interest on a loan?" Surely Tom must've paused a moment, realizing how easily 'rate of return' came tripping off my tongue. But maybe not. For in that pause, surely I would've identified the phrase as an excellent example of alliteration.

"But why should people invest in your company if they can make more with another company," he said. "They're taking a loss then."

Thus was I introduced to their strange definition of loss. For most of us, loss is the difference between what you have at Time 1 and what you have at Time 2. Yesterday, I had ten marbles; today, I have seven; so I lost a few. Three, to be exact. However, people in business define loss as the difference between what you get and what you might've gotten. The baseline is not an actual amount, but some ideal amount. (And they say business people are realists.) So if they get ten marbles and they think they could've gotten a hundred, they 'suffer a loss' of ninety marbles. (Which means, I'd like to point out, that, by their own reckoning, they've lost quite a few more than I have.)

"Well if they'd stop reproducing like rabbits – hey, Sprintster!" One of my track buddies called me over as I passed by, on my way to the pool table. (I ran the 3,000 and my sprinting capacity was pretty much limited to the last ten metres – and reminiscent of Michael Collins' slow-motion strides on the moon.) (Or would have been, had he bothered, back in 1969, to get out of his command module lazy-boy and go down to the surface.) "If they'd stop reproducing like rabbits, maybe they wouldn't be so poor." I was surprised at the topic of discussion. International Business must be this term.

"Yeah," I grabbed a chair, "it's about time they had tougher rape laws."

"What?"

"Well," I also grabbed a glass, "you don't think millions of women want to be pregnant for seven or eight years, do you? Do you really think women actually consent to child number four when the other three are still under six? Have you any idea what it's like to look after three little human beings under six, for twenty-four hours a day? Especially when they're crying because they're so hungry, or they're retarded because they're malnourished –"

"That's just what those women –"

"– were bought for, I know. By their husbands, from their fathers. Men are the ones with the obsession for progeny – their progeny, male progeny." I was moving too fast for them. No doubt some were still considering the notion of tougher rape laws. Or, more likely, just the notion of rape. But I carried on. "And don't forget the violence of

war factor. Iraq and Gaza top the chart with birth rates of 6.7 and 8.0 respectively. I wonder what the figures are for Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia – . I mean really, do you think that after a hard day of castrating the enemy and raping its women, the Man of the House is going to come home to bed and ask first? I don't think so." I took a swallow. "And don't forget, this is war! We have to outnumber them! Funny," I added, "the Pope comes to mind just now." I saw I had lost them. "Though I suppose they wouldn't have to change the rape laws. They could just come up with a male contraceptive, 'the pill' for men. Actually, they did, back in '85."

"Yeah I remember something about that," one of them said. "Reduced your sex drive though."

"Oh. Well. We can't have that." He smiled at my apparent understanding. "HELLO," I raised my voice. "Let me tell you about 'the pill' for women. Side-effects include," I started counting on my fingers – a visual aid, "headaches, nausea, mood changes, yeast infections, loss of vision, high blood pressure, gall bladder disease, liver tumours, skin cancer, strokes, heart attacks, and death. Oh, and I almost forgot, reduced sex drive." I took a long swallow from my glass of beer. "Thing is, and get this – do not pass go until you do – taking the pill is, for many of us, preferable to getting pregnant."

"Yeah, well, you're the ones who get pregnant," he laughed. (Can you say 'non-sequitur?') He had obviously missed my point. But what was his point? I really didn't know. Think. No good. Okay, think like a man. I can't, it hurts. Yes you can, try harder.

"Yeah, maybe you're right. Maybe it's okay that you guys refuse to be responsible for your reproductive capability. You wouldn't remember to take a pill every day anyway. What with your busy life of going to work and coming home again. So we'd end up being responsible for reminding you – perhaps after we pick up the kids on our way home from work, and make dinner, and do the dishes, but before we start the laundry, and see that the homework comes before tv. Which would sort of defeat the purpose." I paused. "Course if it were beef-flavoured and chewable, like, say, the jerky treats my dog scarfs down – and it would have to come in regular and extra-strength so you could boast about your virility – " I switched into my Budweiser voice, "I need the extra-strength to subdue my guys!" And it would have to be available without a prescription, of course – 'Don't need to see no doctor to tell me what I can and can't take!' At all hardware stores. And beer st – hey, wait a minute! We could put it in the beer!" I raised my glass for a toast, but, sadly, no one joined me. Oh well. Pity.

By the end of the night, the marketing guys were holding the floor. They were trying to determine the best slogan ever.

"You deserve a break today," someone suggested. No. Close, but no.

"Harvey makes a hamburger –" several guys joined in, "a beautiful thing." Too long.

"This Bud's for you!" someone loudly nominated and burped. And I swear I suddenly saw its genius: it's monosyllabic.

"Gimme a Golden!" someone else yelled with enthusiasm, but with dubious comprehension of the point under discussion.

"Just do it!" someone shouted. Ah. There we go. Monosyllabic and only three words.

"Hey, Sprintster, what gets your vote?"

I thought for a moment. "White men can't."

Another pub night. Another night of music, pool, and beer. From the entrance, I heard a rowdy "Chugga hugga bugga, Chugga hugga bugga, Chugga hugga bugga – Boo!" coming from one of their tables. Correction. Another night of beer, beer, and beer.

"Who's the occasion?" I asked, as I approached and pulled up a chair.

"Steve. He's going to be a millionaire by the time he's thirty. Just told us his plan."

"Yup. I wanna be a rich sonuvabitch!" Steve shouted, presiding over the table.

"Why?" I shouted back.

"What do you mean?" he sat down.

"Which word don't you understand?"

"What?"

"You don't want to be rich?" Steve asked, realizing it wasn't a rhetorical question. Or would've, if he knew what a rhetorical question was.

"Not particularly, no."

"Why not?"

"Too much responsibility, figuring out what to do with all that money. Frankly, I'd rather watch Murphy Brown."

"Coupla cars, house in the Bahamas, what's to figure out?"

"Oh. You'd spend it on yourself? Even though you didn't deserve it?"

"I'd've made it!"

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean you'd've deserved it. A million bucks – that's what, thirty times what most people make in a year? There aren't enough hours in a day to have worked thirty times as long. And I can't imagine anything that would be thirty times as hard. Would you have made a contribution to society thirty times as valuable? What's your big plan, are you going to manufacture the cure for AIDS? Build plants that can de-radiate nuclear waste?"

Arnie snorted into his beer, and some of the bubbles went up his nose. "Beer straws!" he blurted when he had recovered. And Steve pulled a straw out of his pocket. A very fat straw.

"The prototype," he said, sticking it into his mug, and draining it.

"You get drunk faster," someone explained cheerily. Right. Of course. I got up to go shoot some pool.

When I returned to the table, the discussion was about whether there were aliens walking among us. And if so, should we kill them.

"I say kill the mother fuckers!"

"Yeah. And ask questions later!"

"But what if they're here to help us?"

"Help us what? Do we look like we need help?"

I almost sprayed my beer across the table on that one.

"Why would they come if not to take over, make us into slaves?"

"Yeah or take all our resources or something."

"Or use us for food! Arnie'd make a beautiful hamburger!" Arnie acknowledged the comment by raising his mug.

"Hey Sprintster, what do you think?"

"Aliens walking among us? Yeah. They're called men." I grinned. "And yeah. Kill the mother fuckers."

Believe it or not, all this led to another job. Which makes me think that even business students are schmooze so through and through it leaks out, no, it oozes out, and – a faculty member came by the table one night and vaguely asked if anyone knew anyone who could mark papers for a distance ed course he was teaching. Well, my track-mates, knowing I was this airy fairy English student, immediately volunteered my services. Turns out I didn't even have to say I had experience. Which I did, you'll recall – though the reference letter would've been a problem. I was hired on the spot. And this was the prof who taught HR – the course that covers hiring and firing procedures. (Can I give an example of foreshadowing?)

When I dropped by his office the next day to get the details – and to confirm that he actually remembered hiring me – I found out that the distance ed course he had referred to was for banking professionals seeking certification in various specialities such as – I kid you not – 'Wealth Management.' To obtain such certification, said professionals had to complete a number of courses offered through correspondence by university professors.

Since I didn't know anything about wealth management (and would likely never need to), I was a little concerned about my ability to mark the assignments. However, my concern evaporated – or, more accurately, turned into something of a decidedly different nature – when I received my first batch of assignments along with the 'answer key.' Basically, the assignment questions required short answers of one or two sentences, which essentially could be copied from the course text. Pretty much everyone got 100% except for the few who missed a question or two. I was amazed. And indignant. University credit – an A+ no less – for copying sentences from a book? (I suddenly understood the vehemence that had often accompanied the Comm101 complaints about my "excessively high marking standards".) I had actually written in the margin of the first few of these assignments, "Try to put your answers in your own words instead of copying verbatim from the book," but when I realized that such a comment was warranted on all 134 papers, well, I confess to inconsistency with regard to the provision of feedback.

Before I figured out whether and how to express my concern to the professor, he asked me to come to his office to discuss another project. Turns out he was writing a revolutionary book called Power Training! He showed me the outline: two neatly formatted pages with five columns, headed Motivation, Readiness (carefully subdivided into Psychological and Intellectual), Content Acquisition, Content Application, and Feedback. The first two columns were in green and supra-headed Pre-Put; the next, Content Acquisition, was in blue and supra-headed Input; then Content Application was in orange, Output; and finally the Feedback column was in red and supra-headed Post-Put. In each column, there were some phrases – 'target questions,' 'key examples,' and so on. He was excited, pacing around me as I scanned the two pages, waiting for my response to this master plan.

"Well?" he asked eagerly, eyes shining.

"It's pretty" came to mind. I had not yet developed the meagre diplomatic skills

that would, in any case, have been inadequate. Fortunately, I was still a little stunned, and a little confused as to my role. "It's..."

Never underestimate the power of arrogance to overestimate. "Yes, isn't it great?" he gushed. "See, most people in business, in the real world, who train employees don't really know what they're doing. They're given a content manual, but they know nothing about actually teaching the skills they expect their employees to have by the end of the training. This book will fill that gap! See – Power Training! This book will train the trainers!" He was very excited. Perhaps he was easily excited. In any case, I could tell he was the kind of person who calls an idea – one idea – a 'brainstorm.'

"And..." I still didn't know what I was doing there.

"And I'd like you to help. I need someone with good English, good writing skills."

Ah. "Oh, so you want me to proofread, or edit –" I was on firmer ground now, and I looked around for a manuscript.

"Well – yes. See, if you could just write it up – you'll need to develop the ideas a bit – then I could take a look at it –"

I held the two sheets of paper in my hand. And then I realized that that was all he had. And then I demonstrated beyond a doubt the absence of forementioned diplomatic skills. "You want me to write your book for you."

"Well – I'd still be the author, see they're my ideas," he said kindly. I looked at the sheets again: motivation, readiness, acquisition, application, feedback. His ideas. It suddenly occurred to me that university professors have no teacher training. (I can give an example of irony.)

He continued, "My project grant can cover wages for a research assistant for four months." Is this how you people do things? Is this what you call 'delegating'?

"You'll get the usual undergraduate student stipend," he added. Which was a little over minimum wage. He was hiring me to write his book for minimum wage. Tell you what. You're the author. You write the book. You 'develop the ideas a bit'. Put them into, oh, I don't know, sentences. And paragraphs. And chapters. Then if you want me to check your spelling and grammar, well, maybe. Call me.

"And if you need any guidance with the research, let me know," he smiled. (A really good example.)

So a month later, mostly because I could use the money, I presented a first chapter. It was from a little book I'd been using to prepare for my Piano Teachers' Associate exam about the principles involved in teaching piano. I had turned to the section on motivating children and had pretty much copied it, verbatim. So I expected an A+. And got it. He was very impressed.

"Excellent! This is great!" he said, skimming the pages. "This is perfect for professionals already in the field! Just the right level, the right tone." He beamed. "I look forward to the next chapter!"

Well. It was too easy. And way too much fun. So I carried on. Chapter two came from a manual used at the Training Center for Subversive Warfare. I had to make a few changes – for example, 'Interrogation Techniques' became 'Pre-Quizzes' – but it was surprising how easily 'free America' could be replaced with 'free enterprise'.... (Nevertheless, I had to delete altogether the section on 'Advanced Torture'.) Again, he loved it.

The big test was chapter three. Content Acquisition. The content in question was to be HR-related. I knew next to nothing about HR. So I took most of it from the text he was using for his course. He didn't recognize any of it.

At our next meeting, two months in, he was brimming with pride – he'd sent the first three chapters to the publisher as an interim progress report. Apparently this was standard procedure. I didn't know that.

So, in lieu of chapter four, I presented him with the original material used for the first three chapters, along with the page from the university's calendar that defined plagiarism.

Actually, I didn't exactly present it to him. I sort of left it in his mailbox one night. Well, one pub night. And in good spirits – in very good spirits – I had written across the top – in green, blue, orange, and red – "Chugga hugga bugga – Boo!"

As for marking his distance ed assignments, well, I was going to quit anyway.