

5

MIND THE GAP

Jearl Jearlson set a brisk pace towards the administration block, the tallest structure on the site. In contrast to the concrete functionality of the surrounding buildings it was made out of high tech materials, glistening steel and reflective glass. This was the place where the managers flocked together.

A guest relations' robot hurried out of the building. It was printing several pages from its on-board office system, the paper disconcertingly emerging from its lower chest. "We are sorry sir," it said in a voice programmed to be deferential, "but we were not anticipating you would attend this afternoon's strategy meeting. Please accept a copy of the revised agenda."

"I wasn't expecting to be here but now you have reminded me I have two guests," Jearlson replied without slowing down.

"Very good sir," said the robot, stumbling to keep up. From within its torso was the low hum of another two agendas being prepared.

Jearlson led Marcus and Grand Alf to a room designed to seem cosy even though it was cavernous, fun as well as functional and traditional as well as technologically state of the art. This was the main boardroom at Jearlson Central.

“Ask your second question,” commanded Jearlson. Marcus had almost forgotten he had been promised the answers to only three questions. Before he had time to reflect, the words escaped from his mouth, “How do you develop the plan to get what you want?”

Jearlson smiled and Marcus suspected this was a favourite topic. “You know,” started Jearlson, “this is the one part of business people think they’re getting right, but in fact they’re getting it absolutely wrong, wrong, wrong. Do you want to know what the problem is?”

Marcus did not need to answer as Jearlson was on a roll. “The problem is people are not practiced at thinking strategically. Most managers are too busy worrying about meeting this month’s budget, hitting their quarterly targets and getting their annual returns in on time. Even people in my position have a lot of short term stuff crowding their days, although we don’t always like to admit it. As a consequence, we don’t build thinking habits that help us to be strategic. Just the opposite. We see profits when we should see how value is created, we see ...”

At that moment some of the executives came through the door. There were thorny and horned Reptiloids, smooth skinned, long haired Thetazoids, several different types of forest people and a few Humanoids. They were laughing and joking with each other as they entered but immediately froze when they saw Jearlson in the room. A couple momentarily hovered in the doorway, as if they wanted to go back to their offices and do just a little more preparation. Marcus guessed these were the more junior managers. After they recovered from their initial surprise several made a show of greeting Jearlson but it was clear their relaxed display of camaraderie was underpinned by more than a trace of anxiety.

A Humanoid entered the room a few moments later. Dark skinned with thick black hair she had a poise and confidence that set her apart even though she was wearing a factory worker's functional coverall suit. By the way other people treated her Marcus guessed she was at the top end of the hierarchy.

She greeted Jearlson with a genuine smile and was clearly not fazed he had turned up unexpectedly. He introduced her as Freyah, the site manager and one of the most senior executives in the Jearlson Empire. "We were talking about how we make the plans that help us become the most successful business possible," summarised Jearlson. "What are some of your perspectives?"

The managers had taken their seats and spaces were left for Marcus and Grand Alf to sit on Freyah's left with Jearlson on her right. A computer scribble pad materialised in the glass table in front of Freyah and she picked up a pointed image pen and drew a circle. The sketch appeared on each of the eight surrounding wall mounted screens. "This circle represents everything we could do. In it are all the possible products we could make, all the customers we could serve and all the markets we could enter. It is our 'circle of opportunity'. We could make money anywhere in the circle."

Freyah then drew a triangular shaped wedge and manoeuvred it over a portion of the circle so the image looked like a cake with a slice removed. "This slice represents the Jearlson Corporation." Marcus sketched a replica of the picture in his notebook. "Its placement within the circle shows the best area we could occupy. This is where we can deliver the best products to the best customers for the best returns."

Jearlson joined in, "We have to fight the urge to chase tempting opportunities beyond the boundaries of the wedge. While these are

still within the circle and might seem to strengthen the business by putting money in the bank in the short term, the overall effect would be to weaken our focus and direct our resources to strategically low value activities in the long term.”

The managers had undoubtedly heard the message before, but this was a crisp summary and several started taking notes.

“People make ‘strategy’ more complicated than it needs to be,” Freyah continued, “consequently many businesses operate well below their capability level. A clear vision tells us where we are unique, good research shows us what is available within the circle and sound decision making keeps us on track. As a member of the executive team I participate in robust discussions to test if we have accurately defined and understood our place in the circle,” Freyah shot Jearlson a glance that suggested they had survived many fiery debates on the topic, “but when I am back here as site manager it is my job to put those decisions into effect and optimise performance.”

Jearlson got to his feet and paced around. He was a man with surplus personal energy and did not tolerate being sedentary or silent for too long. “Every day we take another step on the journey towards our future. This journey is paved by the thousands of decisions you and the other Jearlson managers make, put into effect and follow up. Today’s decisions are the stepping stones to tomorrow. Because we have a clear picture of the destination our priorities and emphasis are common to every manager.”

Jearlson pointed to the youngest and most junior manager in the room, a shiny skinned Reptiloid, “Tell our guests what our planning process involves.”

The Reptiloid’s eyes widened and her thin tongue flicked out of

her mouth, a characteristic sign of anxiety. However, her voice was calm and clear and her words carefully chosen, “First we pick the ideal position we want to occupy in five years. Then we make a video of what that will be like. This video shows the kinds of customers we will have, the comments they will make about us, our product range, our relationships internally and how we will work with our suppliers.”

The Reptiloid paused and took a sip of water by elegantly dipping her blue tipped tongue into the glass in front of her and sucking out a small quantity of liquid. “Then we identify the gaps between the situation today and our desired future position and list what we must do to close those gaps. This becomes our action plan for the future.” The Reptiloid shrugged to confirm this was a pretty straightforward process. She looked at Jearlson to see if any more needed to be said.

“All of us use the video, the identified gaps and the action plan as reference points for any decision of importance,” confirmed Jearlson. “An example anyone?”

An older, scallier Reptiloid spoke, “Whether or not to give a customer a discount. If they belong to a type of account representing our future we may give them favourable terms. However, if the customer comes from the wrong part of the circle we will charge the full rate. We may even refer them to another organisation.”

“Good one,” said Jearlson briskly. “It’s surprising how few organisations have a communication vehicle of this kind. Too many have complex documents which make little sense to frontline managers and supervisors and so everyone creates their own way forward.”

“Good for us though,” interjected a Humanoid manager, “it means we can outperform our competition.” The comment produced an assortment of chuckles from around the room.

Jearlson smiled, enjoying the moment of levity. “On the way here,” he said briskly, “I outlined the first step towards success, choosing the right strategic projects. Now we have covered the second step, creating a very clear picture of the outcomes you want to achieve and describing these in a way everyone can understand.” Jearlson looked at Marcus and Grand Alf to make sure they appreciated the two points. “What else do you think we should tell our guests before I let you get on with your meeting?”

Freyah held up the supporting papers for the meeting, “We need to remember to treat this kind of information with caution,” she said, as much for the benefit of those in the room as the visitors. “People get used to looking at numbers and figures, which are only simplified ways to represent the world, and believe these are the real world. Because this is an oversimplified reality it is tempting to create simple solutions. This is a big mistake.”

Jearlson picked up the thread, “There’s only so much that can be captured on a graph or described in a report. The rest we have to witness and experience.”

“The difference between tacit and articulate knowledge,” added an elf-like forest person. “Articulate knowledge can be written down and taught to others, while tacit knowledge is too complex and can only be understood by being there.”

“Give an example,” prompted Jearlson.

The forest person did not hesitate, “If someone is very good at doing something difficult, say creative thinking, they may not be able to describe how they think because they do not know. This does not mean others cannot learn their skills. If you put a number of receptive individuals with the creative thinker for long enough they will ‘absorb’

the ability. After a time the students will replicate their mentor's thinking skill even though they too may be unable to describe the process they apply."

Freyah nodded. "Good description, Talandroll," she said. "Many parts of our business are so richly complex you have to know them for yourself and update your knowledge often." This suddenly made sense of why Freyah was in factory floor clothing.

"It may be a smaller point," offered a Humanoid, "but it is alarmingly easy to get stuck in thinking habits that block us from considering other strategic possibilities." The assorted life forms in the room looked puzzled by this assertion so the Humanoid elaborated, "I have found we are pre-disposed to quickly form the view that a solution has to be 'A' or 'B' when really it can be a mixture. I keep two apparently opposite views in my thoughts for as long as possible to see if both can be satisfied. Only when one becomes overwhelmingly more promising do I get rid of the other."

Marcus noticed Jearlson was studying the young executive as if he was wondering how he might use someone with the courage to speak out and the insight to understand a seldom appreciated truth. In corporate life a chance opportunity to impress an executive can leapfrog someone out of obscurity and into an otherwise unattainable role.

No one offered any new comments so Jearlson provided the group with a few words of encouragement, thanked Freyah and led Marcus and Grand Alf toward the front of the building. "Third question?" he asked.