

chapter 1

As I approached my boss's office, I could see Amanda coming from it. Something seemed different. Her normally animated gait looked decidedly downbeat. Her head was bowed, her permanent grin replaced by a grimace. Before I could ask what the problem was, she had padded quickly past, not even noticing me. Hesitating, I knocked and opened my manager's door.

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I was the first to arrive at the small Italian restaurant. The warm smell of garlic wafted out, drawing in hungry passers-by and giving the place the buzz of busyness. Soon after sitting down, I noticed Julia come in. She spotted me and her face broke into a broad smile as she weaved her way between the tables. My smile was less enthusiastic.

"I've got a big problem with my boss," I said as soon as she sat down.

"What *problem*, Nathan?" she asked.

I should have known.

“OK, the *opportunity* I have is to convince my boss he’s an idiot and that he should resign for everyone’s good,” I said.

Julia smiled but didn’t say anything, instead looking at me expectantly. Julia often found herself acting as a sounding board for my frustrations. After meeting at college many years ago, we had always managed to stay in touch. Over the years we had become business soul mates and had spent many hours discussing various management *opportunities*, as she insisted on calling them. She always seemed to know when I just had to let off some steam.

“Last week,” I continued, “he announced that we have to increase our weekly volume of processed claims. Then yesterday he pulls me into his office and solemnly announces that there probably needs to be a restructure. Despite the fact that we are winning more and more work, he needs to find ways to cut overall costs. He’s given me and the other two team leaders, Amanda and Aaron, three months to look at how our sections work and find ways to be more productive. If we can’t come up with anything ourselves, he will simply force the situation by retrenching one of us, along with a number of our staff. Can you believe it? How can he expect us to increase our processing rates while constantly cutting staff? I need more people to help – not less. Especially since half my people have received little or no training.”

Julia let me ramble on for 10 minutes. I explained how unfair I thought this ultimatum was. That my staff were already working plenty of overtime. That I wondered whether taking on this fight was really going to be worth it.

“Isn’t Amanda due to get married in a few months?” recalled Julia.

“Yes,” I said. “So you can imagine how this is stressing her out. Especially after her fiancé was cut back to part time last month. Then there are the three babies due in the next six months amongst my team’s families, plus two other weddings. And the small issue of my own renovation that has to be paid for.”

“Wow! And your boss accuses your team of not being productive,” laughed Julia.

“Very funny,” I said with a wry smile. “On top of all that, there’s the fact that, as usual, Aaron is just not interested in working on this with Amanda and me. It’s his way or no way for him. He just sees the downsizing as a *fait accompli*, so he’ll do everything he can to make sure he wins what he sees as a competition between the three of us.

“So,” I said finally, “do you still think this is an opportunity, not a problem?”

Julia was silent for a few moments. She is a middle manager like me; a team leader with a large bank. Just like me, she has struggled in the past to keep up with her workload and to meet her targets. With pressure from management and increasing customer complaints, she also found it difficult to keep up the morale of her team. However, I knew that her situation had dramatically changed since we had last caught up. She had been able to make some real changes that had improved her team's output, reduced complaints and seen morale skyrocket. I was hoping some of this might rub off onto me.

"There must be something else you can do to improve your productivity. There always is."

"I've thought about it," I said. "I've looked through all my various lists for ideas. There might be a few things. But we're all working too hard already. Everyone's putting in 110 per cent."

"I'm not talking about working *harder*," said Julia, looking at me seriously. "I'm talking about working *smarter*. How long did you say you have to get a result?"

"Only three months," I said, shaking my head. "It normally takes that long just to think about any substantial change in our organization."

"No - that's perfect!" she said suddenly.