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The Call of the Riled

“So what’s got Dougie’s shorts in a knot this time?” Chuck asked, as the rest of the management team sat quietly around the conference table sipping their morning coffee. They were waiting for Doug and Rhonda to show up. They were late as usual.

Chuck headed up sales. He was tall and slim with a thick head of silver hair parted on the side and a graceful wave across his forehead. He’d been with NMTS for twenty-three years. He should have been feeling the heat of the company’s current revenue crisis. But as he put it to Pete over a few beers the week before, “I am battle-weary and fed up with giving my life to this company. And I’m really sick of playing guess-what-Dougie-is-thinking. He just needs to tell me what he wants me to do and I’ll do my best. I’m fifty-six and counting the days – seven hundred and forty-two to be exact – until I get my first pension check. Then my life will be my own again.”

“But what if the company doesn’t survive?” Pete had asked. “There may not be a pension for any of us if we keep playing the game by the old rules.”

Chuck had waved his hand in contempt, dismissing even the possibility. “It will survive,” he said. “You know Dougie well enough not to fall for his sky-is-falling BS. He’s always trying to motivate us” – he made giant quotation marks in the air – “with his theatrical declarations of doom.”

Now, in the conference room, Pete surveyed the rest of the management team’s cast of characters.

Rosetta – everybody called her Rosie – was looking at the white face of the large clock on the conference room wall. “I wonder who decreed that every conference room in the world be painted the same drab shade of beige?” she said. “There must be entire paint factories running three shifts a day trying to keep up with demand. If NMTS made beige paint, we’d be in great shape. I’m going to take a wild guess and say the meeting today is about the latest numbers.”

Rosie was in charge of the division’s administrative department. She was short and plump with wiry hair in tight curls and a large pair of glasses that magnified her hazel eyes. Her frequent smile softened and lit up her round face. She looked like a friendly owl with frizzy head feathers. She’d been with NMTS for five years, after a short stint at a struggling start-up company. Her instincts were good. That company closed its doors for good two years later.

“Things do sound pretty grim,” Harold added. “I hear the marketing budget is going to be trimmed back again. I don’t think I can avoid showing some of my people the door. And they’ll be the lucky ones. It’s not like the workload is going to decrease.” He looked across the table at Chuck. “I’m sure Doug will expect even more from us to fix our crumbling image and create more leads for your sales guys.”

Harold was a fifteen-year marketing veteran of NMTS and now headed up the marketing department. He had the leathery face and husky voice of a heavy smoker. In baseball season he was very active as one of the region's top semi-professional league umpires. He rarely smiled anymore. Faded laugh lines, like traces of an old creek in a barren desert, hinted that humor once did visit his stern face. Harold no longer believed in a world of black and white, or good and bad. The constant pressure to perform had simply made everything either bleak or bleaker.

The rain didn't look like it was going to stop anytime soon. The wind was gusting and sheets of water washed against the second-floor conference-room window. The room was cold and musty. Somewhere in the distance water was faintly drip, drip, dripping at a constant and maddening tempo.

Rosie went to refill her coffee mug. Looking out the window, she sighed, "I heard this nasty weather is going to be with us for a few days."

"For every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows," Harold mused. "And a foundation leaks and a ball game gets rained out and a car rusts and ..."

Pete turned his attention to Omar, who had just joined the division two months earlier as head of Information Technology. He was new to the company. His easygoing and jovial manner nicely matched his rotund face and body. His shaved head showed the faint dark shadows of a hairline circling around the lower sides and back of his shiny skull. His brilliant white teeth contrasted with his light-brown complexion.

Damali was the division's head of accounting. She'd been with the organization for just over a year. Her straight black hair framed a slender tan-colored face of softly pock-marked skin. She liked to play the part of silent spectator.

“Morning,” Doug barked as he threw open the door. Like a bad actor, he lived for the grand entrance. Rhonda was right behind him. As he made his way to the end of the table, everyone knew that today he was playing the part of a four-star general.

“Let’s get right to it,” he said.

Doug was of average height. His two most prominent features were his belly and his moustache. The former was perfectly rounded, as if he had a beach ball stuffed inside his mock turtleneck sweater. The latter was white, streaked with thin black stripes. It hid his upper lip and accentuated his large pink lower lip. His big fleshy face with its multiple chins and folds made him look more like a walrus than a general.

“We’re in a deep %*#!* shit hole!” he declared as he pushed his glasses higher on his nose.

Doug believed that the strategic use of profanity shocked people into paying more attention. Pete thought he saw Chuck roll his eyes.

“Our sales are sliding off a cliff,” Doug continued. “But our expenses are continuing to climb. We’re running out of cash. So we need to restructure our finances. We need to come up with a plan showing we can turn this ship around and convince the banks to give us the credit we need until we do. Our job this morning is to figure out how to do that.”

Pete reached into his pocket. He knew this was going to be a three-pill meeting.

“I’d like to start by understanding why our current results are so badly below forecast,” Doug said, his moustache quivering slightly. “We’re not even close to hitting our numbers.”

Doug stared down the table at Chuck, who was sitting forward in his chair with his elbows on his knees. “Chuck, why are sales way off your projections?”

Chuck delivered his lines like a robot. “We’re getting a lot of delayed decision making. It’s partly due to customer concerns about our future viability and it doesn’t help that we’re at the low point of service-contract renewals right now. Our sales force is working flat out. There’s some business in the pipeline that should close soon.”

“Why don’t I see projected sales of the new services we launched last quarter in your forecast reports?” Doug asked.

Pete remembered how Chuck had derided those new services as “Dougie’s latest goofball idea for saving this company.”

“We’re just getting those valuable new services positioned to our prospects and customers now,” Chuck said.

“So what’s it going to take for your team to hit your numbers?” Doug asked.

“We need to see the market turn around and the press on this company to get better.”

“Come on, Chuck! Are you telling me your sales plan is prayer? What specific steps are you taking to help us generate revenue today? If you can’t tell me that, maybe I need to find someone who can.”

Chuck studied his shoes. Everyone else became very interested in their notes, coffee mugs, or the water rivulets on the window. Rhonda’s keyboard clacked as she recorded the meeting minutes on her computer.

“Getting stronger marketing support and fixing our service delivery issues would help too,” Chuck said.

Harold scowled at Chuck and continued twisting a paper clip into new and unusual shapes.

Doug looked around the table. “Does anyone have a single new idea or insight?”

The hush said it all.

Finally, Omar spoke up. “As the new guy on the team, I’d like to offer some observations and suggestions,” he said.

“Since IT gets deep into each department here, we get a good feeling for what’s going on. I’m concerned by the large number of urgent projects and growing list of critical objectives we seem to have. It’s overwhelming. We can’t possibly do it all. On top of that, urgent new priorities seem to be thrown at us every day.”

Mostly from the big guy at the head of this table, Pete wanted Omar to add.

“I think we need a better process for agreeing on our goals and priorities and sticking with them,” Omar concluded.

Pete saw Chuck smirk and exchange a long look with Rosie. He tilted his chair backwards and crossed his legs. Like everyone else around the table, he knew the show was about to begin.

Doug glared at Omar. “We have a lot of urgencies because our situation is very urgent. Our biggest problem is lack of accountability. Managers here are not taking responsibility for delivering on what we agree to do. What do you suggest?”

Omar pulled a few stapled sheets from a file in front of him and handed one set to Doug. “I, I ... have made a list of the projects each department is working on that involves IT in some, in some, uh, way. As you can see, umm, it’s an impossibly long list and there is a lot of overlap and duplication. So I have followed that with a master project-and-priority list based on my discussions with each department head.”

Doug flipped through the first few sheets. He looked up and moved his big moustache upward and outward into what was intended to be a smile. “This is useful, Omar. Thank you. It’s perfect timing for our budget review and the resetting of our strategies and plans.”

Omar beamed. The rest of the group looked apprehensive.

In his best teacher-to-kindergarten-kid voice, Doug said, “Let’s use this list to educate you, Omar, and highlight the

lack of urgency and accountability problems we have in our division.”

For the next hour and a half, he proceeded down the list, giving a forceful argument for the vital importance of every project. He grilled each manager on the ones that involved their groups. With each project he fiercely challenged the manager – or in some cases two or three managers – on whether they really thought this project should be moved off the top-priority list. No one did and none were.

When Doug pushed hard for an explanation of why a project was late or not completed, he was given quiet, monotone explanations, such as factors beyond the control of that group, how hard everyone was working on it, and how the project was being researched further. Doug would often interrupt with “that’s unacceptable,” “we can’t keep delaying this project,” “you really need to get on top of this.”

It was a painful lesson for Omar to endure. His beaming face had faded to grim. Beads of sweat now formed above his eye brows and prepared to break out on his reddening forehead.

“So we agree that Omar’s project list is valid,” Doug said, looking around the table. “Omar, do you now understand how vital all of these projects are to dealing with our crisis?”

“Yes, I guess I do,” was Omar’s almost whispered response.

“Good. I’m glad we have a consensus on this one. Let’s get the projects done, people, and damn all of your lousy excuses. Okay. We’ll take a short break and then Heather is going to join our meeting to *enlighten* us with her report and recommendations regarding the organizational survey results in the client services division.”

Doug and Rhonda left the room and went down the hall to Doug’s corner office suite.

Omar got up and went to the men’s room. Harold and Chuck followed him in. “So how do you like our management

meetings so far?” Chuck asked with a cynical snicker as they stood beside each other at the urinals.

“It didn’t go exactly as I’d planned,” Omar replied. “I don’t understand why you and the other managers didn’t tell Doug what you were telling me about these projects. We can’t do them all.”

“Of course we can’t,” Harold said. “But it’s a lot easier to get forgiveness than permission from Doug. We all just work on what are clearly the most important issues and tell him what he wants to hear.”

“He’s really easy to get along with once you learn to obey him,” Chuck said. “And if he wants any of your bright ideas, he’ll give them to you. Omar, you’re a good guy and I am sorry to see you get grilled this morning. But I could spot this one coming a mile off when you pulled out your list.”

By now Pete had joined in the proceedings. “Omar, we’ve all got battle scars from tangling with Doug. He figures that you’re not carrying your share of the load if you don’t have ulcers or marital problems. It’s just easier to go along to get along with him.”

Omar dried his hands, shook his head, and walked out the door back to the meeting room.

There was very little conversation around the table as the group waited ten minutes for Doug and Rhonda. When they finally marched in, Doug introduced Heather with barely disguised contempt as “having some corporate HR wisdom to share with us about this.” He waved his copy of the organizational survey report with its dozens of little red Post-it Note flags flicking in the air.

Heather’s presentation, complete with colorful bar and pie charts, was shown on the screen at the front of the meeting room. She was the corporate Human Resources director and not a member of the division’s management team. Doug had

grudgingly agreed to allow her into today's meeting when his boss, Cy Garnet, the company's president, had insisted she meet with the management team to review and interpret the organizational survey results that each manager had recently received.

Heather was in her thirties. She was about five feet two, slim, with straight shoulder-length auburn hair and a creamy smooth complexion. She radiated friendliness and approachability.

Running through the survey results, she pointed out how morale had dropped across the whole client services division, but especially Pete's operations department. The client services divisional results were lower, percentage-wise, than those of the overall company. She handled challenges to the validity and accuracy of the survey data, but most of the managers weren't convinced by her answers. The lowest categories were trust, communications, and teamwork.

Heather carried on: "In the past two weeks, I did further analysis of the written comments on the survey and talked with many people throughout your division to bring you some further insights on the management issues you might want to address. What's emerged is that people don't feel you're openly sharing information and letting them know what's really going on. But the biggest problem is the departmentalism and turf wars. Most of that seems to be a reflection of challenges this team has in working together."

Doug jumped on that comment and demanded examples. Heather measured her words carefully, describing e-mails that were circulating between marketing, sales, and operations with accusations and defenses flying back and forth. Doug had not heard of these contentious issues and demanded to be copied on the e-mails so he could "get to the bottom of this."

Pete grimaced. No doubt he'll fire out a succession of his infamous flaming e-mails to scorch us into being good little boys and girls, he thought.

Heather stated that a rising number of client service problems were because departments weren't keeping each other informed. Once again Doug demanded examples. Heather cited a few that would be almost funny if they weren't so damaging to internal and external relationships.

Chuck threw in that one had resulted in a medium-sized customer failing to renew its contract. He went on to complain about marketing's lack of urgency in meeting the sales department's needs.

Harold snapped back, "Failure to plan on your part should not make for an emergency on our part!"

Doug cut off further discussion.

The questions and discussions put Heather's portion of the meeting well into the lunch hour, and forty-five minutes past what seemed to be her allotted time. But since there was no posted agenda, no one was quite sure what Doug had in mind. Rhonda came to the rescue.

"Mr. Drake, you are late for your luncheon meeting," she said.

But Doug wasn't finished yet. "Thanks for your *enlightenment*, Heather," he said. His volume and pitch rose. "I am very disturbed by what I am hearing here. You have all got to get your act together and get along. If you can't start working together as a team, I may have to make some changes to get players who can."

With that he bounced to his feet and disappeared out the door. Rhonda snapped her computer shut, wrapped up the power cord, and followed in his wake.

Pete headed back to his own office. The voice-mail indicator light on his desk phone was flashing crimson red like

an ambulance rushing to the scene of a horrific disaster. Probably a dozen messages, a bunch of them urgent, he thought. A glance at his computer screen showed forty-one new e-mail messages, many of them marked with red exclamation marks. This is exactly why I hate bloody meetings, he thought. He shook a few pills from the big plastic bottle in his desk drawer into his hand and poured his sixth or seventh coffee from his personal pot. Meetings get in the way of all the work we have to do around here. And this one was a huge waste of time when we can least afford it.

Pete sipped his coffee and stared out the window. He picked out individual raindrops slanting downward from the foggy mass overhead. On and on they fell, smash, smash, smashing into the clear wall. I know how that feels, he snorted to himself. He looked around the tight edges of the window. I'll bet these are sealed to keep us from jumping out.

Suddenly his eyes were drawn to a shadowy shape on the grass beside the parking lot below. Barely visible through the gloom was what looked like a large cow or horse nibbling on the lower branches of a small tree. It stopped and turned its head upward to gaze at Pete's office window. They locked eyes. Then it faded back into the mist.

I'm really losing it now, Pete thought, turning back to his computer.