

Obstruction

7:32 a.m., Ryerson Tower, 135 South LaSalle Street, Chicago, Illinois.

“Good morning, Mister Joffe.” The elderly guard glanced up from his station and nodded perfunctory at the thin, immaculately dressed businessman.

“Good morning, Sam.” Roy Joffe stopped at the station and placed his palm on the small gray pad on the counter. Immediately the identification profile flashed up before the guard, who nodded for him to pass. A chime rang: Roy had been identified and was free to enter.

He brushed some lint off of his all-wool gray pinstriped suit and walked to the elevator bank, stopping in front of the one door that was made of stainless steel, etched with decorative art-deco scenes of industry. He simultaneously placed his index finger against another pad on the wall and put his right eye up against a small, blinking red dot. Another chime indicated that the dual identification system had cleared him to use the private elevator to the executive floor. The doors parted and he stepped inside. There were no floor markings in this elevator; it went to only one floor.

Roy stared at the Ryerson Industries logo, a worker with a hardhat marching upward with crude mining equipment and stars in the background, for the fourteen second ride up to the eighty-fourth floor of Ryerson Tower. Roy loved his job and couldn't wait to get to work every morning. He had finally found a position where he

could fully use his talents and make a real impact on an organization. He had only been here for three months, but he already knew he had found his life's calling.

He stepped out of the elevator and crossed the expansive lobby to the row of offices lining the south wall. The most important executives had panoramic views of the Chicago-Lake Michigan skyline. He nodded to some of the others who were seated or standing about. He vaguely recognized two or three but made no attempt to stop and talk to them. He headed directly to his office. Roy knew he had a busy day ahead of him.

He stopped at the low-slung desk in front of his office. "Hello, Melanie," he said with a smile. "You're here bright and early today."

His secretary favored him with an indifferent glance accentuated by a noisy pop from the bubblegum she was chewing. Without missing a stroke or a pop, she went back to painting her nails an iridescent shade of purple. Roy gave credit where credit was due. Melanie had outdone herself today. Her heavy black mascara and eyeliner, bright crimson cheeks, and painted mouth on a pale face gave Roy's secretary the look of a Kabuki mask. Her bouffant lacquered hairstyle topped her small head like a battle helmet. Melanie did not hide her long legs beneath the desk, but crossed and positioned them provocatively to the side. The jet-black nylons didn't quite meet the tight red mini-skirt, so a glimpse of fish-white flesh was offered free to any casual observer. Likewise, her paper-thin blouse left little to the imagination. Roy loved the whole effect; it was so outlandish.

Melanie was also as dumb as a rock and mean-spirited to boot. She had been a real find.

In the age of neural upgrades, dim witted, incompetent employees were becoming scarce and increasingly hard to find and hire. Roy knew that he didn't really need a secretary. Instantaneous communications and voice actuated document production had made typing an arcane skill, and Melanie couldn't type anyway. Every officer-level employee still had assistants to do most of their dirty work, but secretaries were strictly a perk - a symbol of the importance of the man or woman in the organization. Technology had made offices practically obsolete. Virtual interface was so common and efficient that meetings could be held anywhere in the world without any of the participants being physically present. This had precipitated a massive crash in commercial real estate markets across the country. But people like Roy had put an end to all of that chaos.

Although Roy knew he didn't really need a secretary, he made good use of Melanie. For one, she took all of his vid-calls to the endless irritation of everyone in the organization, not to mention customers and suppliers. "So, any important calls, Melanie?"

She sighed as if in pain and keyed up the backlog list. "Fourteen first calls from yesterday, twelve second calls going back the last three days, and seven third calls. Of the third calls, Joyce Grant, a field vice-president in one of our remote star regions, says that if you don't call her back, she is going to take the next company shuttle back to Earth and personally rip your face off." She smirked as she waved her finger to scroll through the other messages. "I saw her at the last Christmas party. If she gets more than two gin fizzes in her, I'd watch out."

"Okay, I guess it's time to call her back. Anything else?"

“No, just the usual whining. Everyone’s project is important and time sensitive, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” Roy began to leave and then stopped short, as if a thought just occurred to him. “Oh, by the way, the survey I asked you to do in support of Jenkin’s proposal, have you done that yet?”

Melanie paused and stared past him, lost in thought. That must hurt, he mused.

Jenkins was an assistant VP in one of the product development departments. He had pulled out of research a new technique of crystalline development that would speed trans-jump communications between star systems. He wanted quick approval to retool two out-system factories to get the product to market on a fast track and had succeeded in getting Ryerson to assign the highest priority. Roy’s quick thinking had resulted in a marketing plan being inserted into Jenkin’s Business Model Action Scenario’s critical path. Roy’s department was in charge of the customer survey portion of that plan. Over Jenkin’s vitriolic objections, Roy had assured all present that he would put his best people right on it. He had then assigned the task to Melanie.

A light bulb finally went off over Melanie’s head. “Oh, you wanted me to develop a customer class list.”

“And?”

She scrunched up her face again. “Oh yeah, you wanted me to assign directors to develop the survey questions.” She shrugged unconcerned. “Gee, Mister Joffe, I must have forgotten.”

Excellent. Roy nodded his head thoughtfully. “Well, Mister Jenkins can’t get his project approved and underway until that market survey is completed. And it was supposed to be done three weeks ago.”

“Yeah, his vid-messages have been pretty rude these past weeks. You want I should start on it?”

Roy stroked his chin and continued slowly nodding his head. “That might be a good idea, you think?”

She was now nodding her head in the same fashion. “I guess.” She turned back to her desk and cracked her gum as she resumed applying lacquer to her nails. “Maybe I can start after lunch. I’m very busy, you know.”

Roy’s voice dripped with sincerity. “Yes, Melanie, I know. Keep up the good work.”

He turned and whistled as he approached the frosted glass entrance to his office. This was starting out to be a pretty good day. He stopped in front of the door and took in the gold embossed letters signifying he had finally arrived in the corporate world. He had found his true calling. He was a man with a purpose. He was a man of importance. He never tired of looking at those stylish gold letters:

Roy L. Joffe, Vice President – Bureaucratic Operations.

10:42 a.m., Conference Room C, third floor.

“This is the third damned budgeting meeting we’ve had in the past week,” thundered Raymond Buecher, Vice President of Third World Exploitation. The heavysset

man had thinning, peppered hair flying in all directions around a blushed, red face. His chair clattered to the floor as he stood. Towering above the rest of the participants, he glared at Joffe.

“Now Ray,” cooed a prim, thin woman at the end of the table. “Don’t get all excited. You’re going to have a heart attack.”

“I have a mechanical heart, you twit.”

Ellen Marshak, Director of Artificial Intelligence Resources, adjusted her fashion glasses, and calmly looked at the older man. “Do you have mechanical veins in your brain, Ray? You could still have a stroke.”

Buecher huffed and waved his hand at her in dismissal. He turned his attention back to Joffe. “I’ve cost-justified these programs for my factories. It meets all of the corporate hurdle criteria. I don’t know why I can’t get it out of budget committee. Hell, I don’t know why it even needs to go through budget committee. These retooling mods will have a ten-to-one payback in the first twelve months. It’s a no-brainer.”

Joffe templed his hands and slowly looked up to meet Buecher’s angry face. His voice was calm, as if he were getting weary of having to explain the obvious. “It may meet the hurdle criteria, but it has to go through the Corporate Resource Allocation Model.”

“So how long does that take, one second?”

“Ray, it’s not that simple. The results have to be screened by the Information Technology Strategy Group, and those results have to be forwarded to the Audit Committee before they come to us here at the Budgeting Committee.”

“Don’t forget Strat Planning,” Ellen chimed in, smiling maliciously.

“Of course,” Joffe continued. “We have to send our results down to the Strategic Planning Committee who usually has to get input from their Futurist sub-committee before they can act. And any new programmatic requests, or even changes to active requests, require new model runs and the process has to start all over again.”

Buecher picked his chair off the floor and slumped back into it, shaking his head in defeat. “When I started with this company over forty years ago, we spent a ton of money on consultants to come in and show us how to speed up our management processes. But now...” He crossed his arms in resignation.

Joffe shrugged his shoulders and picked up a sheet of paper from the pile before him. “Ellen, I believe we were discussing your request to purchase and install the Ram-4 robotic enhancements to our off-world drillers. I see your income and cash flow proforma statements, but have you gotten feedback from the Human Resources Department?”

“They’re waiting on a response from the union. If we don’t hear from them in a few days, can we take their silence for assent?”

“Sorry, Ellen. I don’t think so.”

“Union? Since when do we have unions?” Jeff, a middle aged Director of Supply Chain, now balding and going to pot, looked up in alarm.

Several around the table shook their heads in disgust and pity. “Access your vid-broadcasts, Jeff,” someone sneered. Everyone figured Jeff as a candidate for early retirement.

“Another brilliant idea from our company man here.” Buecher gestured towards Joffe as if he were flinging dung off his finger.

“Now, Ray,” Joffe said, nonplussed. “Our employees are the most important resource at Ryerson Industries and their input is a critical success factor to our operations.”

Several around the table snickered at the insincere quoting from the tagline in the most recent annual report.

Buecher could see he was getting nowhere with the rest of the group, so he changed tack. “All right, but why do we have to come to these meetings in person? It takes me two hours on the company jump-jet to get here from my home in South Africa. And if I’m out of system at one of our production facilities, it can take days to get here. Can’t we go back to virt-conferencing? It would be much more efficient.”

Joffe was shaking his head. “Ray, we’ve been through this before. In a virtual meeting, everyone is distracted by neural messages. We can’t hold a meeting when the participants are mentally carrying on conversations with others. If everyone is physically here in the room where the meeting is taking place, then we can make sure that everyone is focusing on the topics at hand.”

Buecher slumped back in his chair, defeated. “All right, let’s get on with this meeting.”

Roy glanced down at his sheaf of papers and frowned. He swung his left arm up to his line of vision and stared at a metallic object held on his arm by a brown strap. Although his internal neural clock continuously told him the time, like everyone else’s did, he enjoyed ceremoniously looking at his watch. He had found it in an old antique store on West Jackson Street and it was one of his prized possessions, one that got many admiring comments from his status conscious peers. He watched the thin second hand

click along past the worn 'Timex' logo and sighed. "It's past 11:00 and we're not even a third of the way through our agenda. Everyone please call up your calendars so we can schedule a follow-up meeting. Let's see, how does next Thursday sound?"

12:10 p.m., Dining Room at the Everest Club.

"Roy, so good of you to make it." Harvey Matanky, a customer service vice-president, nervously pumped Joffe's hand and turned to a heavy-set man still seated at the small table. "I'd like you to meet one of our most important customers, George Frontgate, senior Purchasing Agent for AbraDex."

The two stiffly shook hands and they all sat. Immediately a white-jacketed waiter appeared with a silver decanter of water and asked for drink orders as he poured. Roy stared at him as he wrote down the orders on a paper pad. He knew this was strictly symbolic, a throwback to the old days. The Everest Club was the most exclusive restaurant in Chicago, mainly due to its attention to nostalgic details, such as human waiters.

He gave his order and watched the waiter move off to the kitchen. After a silent moment, he turned his attention back to the table. George Frontgate was frowning as he sized him up while Harvey nervously fiddled with his silverware.

"So anyway, George," Harvey said, breaking the ice, "How was your trip to the outer systems last month? You're a brave man to venture off into unpatrolled areas."

"Let's cut the crap, Harvey." Frontgate hadn't taken his eyes off of Joffe. He was angry. "Why hasn't Ryerson signed the Vendor's Agreement with us? It's been in

your organization for two months now. We do over ten billion credits worth of business with you guys and keep three of your factory colonies busy. What's the holdup?"

Joffe pretended to study the murals on the wall as the waiter silently placed drinks in front of them. After he left, Roy turned to face Frontgate. "George, we just don't snap our fingers and everything happens all at once. We have to put the agreement through our internal and external legal council, then..."

"Why both?" Frontgate interrupted. "My other suppliers have expedited processes and Ryerson never had this level of legal review before. Don't you trust us?"

Roy held up his hand as if to ask for patience and then continued. "Of course we trust you. We're just performing due diligence. You know how it is. Our internal legal staff can only address commercial terms. We must have outside expertise to address possible exposure on labor issues, off-world environmental concerns, transportation liabilities; the list goes on. After that, our Ethics Committee has to review the compliance policies and history of all of your divisions and the companies you do business with. After that our Operations Impact Task Group has to..."

"That's going to take forever," Frontgate said, shaking his head. "Don't you realize you exist in a competitive environment? If you don't speed things up to meet the customer's need, then we will go to one of your competitors." He took a sip of his drink and sat back, a challenge on his face.

"Hey, George, no need for that kind of talk. We can work something out, can't we, Roy?" Harvey's eyes were pleading and sweat was beginning to form at his hairline.

Joffe held Frontgate's eyes and continued. "You certainly are free to go to any one of our competitors at any time, George. And on any of the thousands of semi-

finished components we supply to you, there are probably five to ten alternate sources you can buy from. But in the past three years, how many of your suppliers have been able to finish their contracts with you?"

Joffe let the question hang in the air for a moment and then went on. "Let's take, for example, the J-113 electronic switch, a basic component in most of your off-world vehicles. In that period, you've had seventeen suppliers for that item, of which nine are now out of business and three are in financial dire straits. The others are all behind in their deliveries and are either hitting you up for contract changes, or are in various stages of litigation with you. And Why? You've changed the design on that switch four times in the last year alone. And then you demand your vendors to quickly provide the new switch to your factories."

"Science is rapidly changing," the large man intoned. "We have to provide the latest technology in our products and be the first to market in order to stay ahead of our competition. That's the basic credence of business."

"And your company has always been the first to market with the latest in technology. Your company is well known for being the leader in efficiency and rapid change. So tell me, George, how's business been lately?" Joffe allowed a thin smile to crease his otherwise stolid face.

Frontgate sat glaring at him, but his earlier indignation and outrage had given way to resignation.

2:45 p.m. Ryerson Tower, 84th Floor.

“Oh Mister Joffe,” Melanie chirped from her desk station. “Mister Sands wants to see you. I told him you had a meeting with the Marketing Research Department at three, but he said he’d wait.”

Roy smiled. “No, tell Gary to come on in. Inform the Market Research folks that something has come up and we’ll have to reschedule the meeting for another day.”

She snapped her gum and shook her head. “They’re not going to like that. This is the third time you’ve rescheduled that meeting.”

“They’ll get over it.” He breezed past her and entered his office. He took a moment to enjoy the view of the Chicago skyline that ran from Richard Daley Park surrounding the new Adler Planetarium all the way to the empty steel mills of Indiana. He heard a familiar sound and turned to see the smiling face of Gary Sands strolling through the door.

“Hey boss, I’ve got some good news for ya.” Gary was a short, rotund man with a polished, hairless head and an I.Q. slightly higher than a woodchuck. His nickname around the company was ‘Bowling Ball’, in reference to his intelligence as well as his body shape. Gary’s sense of fashion had him wear corduroy suits to work every day which produced the familiar zip sound as his chubby legs rubbed together when he walked. His other nickname on the executive floor was ‘Zipper’. Gary had been rescued from the unemployment line three months ago by Roy and named to the newly created position: Director of Nepotism.

“Always glad to see a member of my management team hard at work, Gary. What have you got for me?”

Gary's bulk poured out of his chair as he leaned forward. "A real find, Roy. Ethel, a manager in Automated Accounting, has a nephew with Intell scans in the low forties."

Joffe whistled. The few people who had intelligence scores that low were usually sent off-world to mining colonies in need of manual labor. With neural brain enhancements becoming such a common procedure, these types of individuals were becoming rare. "He's available?"

"Yep. Not only is he perpetually confused, he's lazy. Doesn't even want to run a mining dragline. I personally interviewed him and convinced him to come with Ryerson Industries. I've already gotten him through Human Resources Department under your new 'Diversity Hiring Program'. He starts tomorrow."

"Good work, Gary. Sounds like you got a winner there."

The fat man blushed in pleasure at the praise from his boss. "You haven't heard the best part yet. I placed him as a manager in Internal Auditing. He's already been named to three committees, two of which are on the critical path for new project authorizations."

"Wow, that should slow things down." Roy was shaking his head at this coup.

Suddenly there was a chime and Melanie's form holoed in front of him. "Mister Joffe, you told me to remind you of your meeting with the Board at 4:00."

"Thank you, Melanie." He watched as her form disappeared. He turned to his Director. "Got to go see the big boys, Gary. Keep up the good work."

4:02 p.m., Ryerson Tower, 39th floor, BoardRoom.

You couldn't help but be impressed, even a little in awe, at the sight of the Ryerson Boardroom. The walls were done in polished black walnut, real wood, not the synthetic kind. The long table that dominated the center of the room was marble with blue slate and ivory inlays in exotic designs. Holo-pictures of famous icons of 21st century business lined the walls, each of them at one time having served either on the Ryerson Board or as a senior level officer in the corporation. Like the Everest Restaurant, white-jacketed attendants stood mutely by to provide for any boardmember's needs during sessions. Roy Joffe couldn't help but feel a thrill of power by just being in this room.

He had just been escorted in and now stood at the foot of the table, staring at the three who sat at the other end. At the head was Jenson Ryerson, Chairman, Chief Executive Officer, founder and patriarch of Ryerson Industries. Old man Ryerson, as employees affectionately referred to him, had a full head of shock-white hair that was immaculately combed straight back. He was robust in stature and personality. It was rumored that he was over 140 years old, not unusual in this day, but rarely was anyone as active in business at such a late age. His eyes were bright and still predatory.

To Ryerson's left was Tom Stenson, the President and Chief Operating Officer. Not much younger than Ryerson, he had been with the old man since the beginning. He was a petite and unassuming man, but anyone who had ever dealt with him knew better than to underestimate his abilities.

To Ryerson's right sat Lynette Bailey, head of the combined Chicago Financial Exchanges and an outside board member of Ryerson Industries. Lynette was young,

about Roy's age, and very attractive. Roy felt a combination of lust and fear when he met her eyes.

This was not a full Board meeting, but a session of the Board's Personnel sub-committee. This group was responsible for executive succession planning and recommending to the full Board compensation packages and major promotions and dismissals. Roy couldn't help but wonder why they would call him up here. He had only been with the firm three months. He hoped it wasn't bad news.

"Roy, thank you for coming up here on such short notice." Ryerson rose as he indicated a chair to his right where Joffe should sit.

"My pleasure, sir." He shook hands with Ryerson and nodded greetings to the other two as he sat down.

"Roy, let me get right to the point. I'm damned impressed with the job you've done since coming aboard here, damned impressed. I have to say that when Lynette first proposed creating your position, I thought she was nuts. I had spent my life building Ryerson Industries into what it is by being the first to embrace change and new production technologies and products. Over the years I've focused most of my energies on applying the latest management techniques to respond quicker to customer needs, foster innovation among the employees, and break down the unproductive bureaucratic structure. It's what built this company and made it successful.

"But change became so rapid that it was like a gravity engine blown through the stops; it was out of control and we were beginning to sink. We were spending more time retooling our factories to address the latest technological advances in our products, or to accommodate our customers' changes, than we spent producing anything. Fortunately,

with your help, that's changing and it looks as if we'll end this quarter with an operating profit."

"But Jen," Bailey began. "The corporation is still sick. You still have a long way to go."

Ryerson grimaced and reluctantly nodded in agreement. Joffe noted that few people could be so blunt with one of the most powerful and respected men in the universe.

"Yes, your right, Lyn." He turned back to Roy. "We need more of your magic, son. We're going to promote you to Senior Vice President with all the attendant perks, effective immediately. We'll send the press release as soon as this meeting is concluded."

Roy's eyes went wide. "I don't know what to say, sir."

"Roy." Bailey's tone was stone cold. "Recognize that with elevated status comes more responsibility. We are going to reset your performance expectations upward and they will be quite aggressive. We need more improvement in your area to get the corporation back on track. Now, as a representative of the stockholders, I'd like to know what you have in mind for the next thirty days."

Her reputation was well deserved, Joffe thought. But he was ready for this. "To be frank, Ms. Bailey, I'm doing all I can with the resources I have available to me. I can continue to deliver slowdown on a measured pace, but to meet the expectations I think you have, I'd like to suggest something else."

"Go on," she prompted.

“There is a new offshoot to the Society of Obstructionists that is showing some real promise. I’ve spoken to one of the premier practitioners of this new management discipline. His title and paygrade would have to be Vice-President, Vice-President of Fraudulent Operations.”

Ryerson reacted as if he had received a jolt of electricity. “Fraud? We have a very good security department that handles that. Fraud was eliminated here years ago.”

Joffe could see Bailey nodding her head, a small smile creeping up on her face. She understood. He continued. “No, sir. This position would not be responsible for stopping fraud, but for perpetuating fraud inside of Ryerson Industries.”

Ryerson and Stenson sat in muted shock. Bailey slapped the table and laughed. “I like it.”

I’ve been a career management consultant for over 30 years and in my earlier days (1980s) there were a lot of management buzzwords and techniques that promised to make organizations more efficient (management gurus got rich pitching these flavors of the month). I remember sitting around with my fellow consultants wondering what would happen if companies all became so efficient and well-managed they wouldn’t need consultants anymore. And then we would all laugh because we knew that would never happen. But I remember thinking at the time: What if? And if companies became perfectly efficient, could that create any unintended consequences?