

Introduction: The Story That Started It All

There are times in our lives when what may appear to have been a terrible decision turns out to be a great learning experience and "blessing in disguise." Early in my career I spent three months as director of research at a small consulting firm. Although I didn't realize it at the time, this brief experience would profoundly shape my understanding of employee motivation and engagement and provide the insight that led me to create the RESPECT Model. I share some of that experience with you now in the hope that it will highlight for you the critical role respect plays in keeping employees engaged.

The Last Guy Sat There

As anyone might be, I was excited and also a bit nervous for my first day of work. I arrived forty-five minutes early and found the door locked. I waited forty-five minutes before being let in by Sherry, the company's receptionist. She asked if I had a meeting with someone. I had apparently not made much of an impression when introduced as the new director of research two weeks earlier by Mary and John, the owners of the firm. I proudly announced "I work here!" and reintroduced myself. She replied, "Oh yeah, you're the new guy" and proceeded to hang up her coat, get coffee, and begin the day's crossword puzzle at her desk.

I assumed that Mary or John would be in shortly to show me around, introduce me to the staff and discuss more fully their specific goals and expectations. Not knowing quite what to do, and receiving no direction or assistance from Sherry, I simply waited in a chair across from her desk, which served as the reception area. After thirty minutes, I finally asked if she knew when Mary or John would be arriving. "Oh, they're not coming in today," she replied. What? Could I somehow have screwed up my starting date? Confused and embarrassed, I began to put on my jacket and leave when the office phone rang. Sherry handed it to me—it was John. He apologized for having been called away for a last-minute meeting and assured me that Sherry would take good care of me. I put Sherry back on the phone and she nodded a few times and hung up. She picked up a manila envelope that had

been sitting on her desk and said, "Here are the new employee forms for you to fill out."

Recognizing that a hard surface would be useful, I asked where I might find an available desk. She walked me around the corner and said, "The last guy sat there." To the left of the desk were a few dying plants and my new officemate, TJ, who warmly introduced himself and welcomed me to the company. He then offered to take me around and introduce me to the rest of the staff. Now we were getting somewhere! As we went around the office my new team members appeared engaged in a number of different activities, including conversations on sports and stocks, surfing the Web, and playing online solitaire. There was a college intern, Elaine, who did appear to be working.

After the tour, I went back to my desk and completed the forms. I handed them to Sherry and asked if John had said what I should do next. He had not. So, I asked TJ if he needed any help. He smiled and said no. As I walked around the office reiterating my offer, I received several bemused looks and no takers. I returned to my desk and thought: Have I been inserted into a "Dilbert" cartoon?

Committed to doing something productive, I found the janitorial supplies and cleaned my desk and some bookshelves. I then picked dead leaves off the plants, gave them a good watering, and moved them closer to a sunny window. I looked at my watch and thought, "How could it only be 10:30 A.M.? What am I going to do the rest of the day?" I remembered having come across several boxes of pencils in my desk and took to sharpening them. When finished, I carefully packed the pencils back into their boxes according to their length and placed them back in my desk. It was to be one of the most satisfying and productive experiences of my tenure.

TJ had been watching me "work" while talking to his girlfriend on the phone. When he hung up I told him that I was bored out of my mind. He suggested that I learn to pace myself. Taking pity on me, he handed me a stack of reports and said, "You can read these over for typos if you'd like." He then grabbed his coat and said that he had to run out. Running sounded like a good idea.

At noon Sherry came into my office and said that she wanted to show me something. She walked me to the front door and pointed to a small magnetic whiteboard with everyone's name written

down the left side and two columns labeled "In" and "Out." My name had been added to the bottom of the list and a small magnetic circle indicated that I was "In." Everyone else's circles were in the "Out" column. Although I had actually brought my lunch, there was no way that I was staying "In" and went to move my circle to "Out." Sherry then explained that team members took turns answering the phones during her lunch break and, as I was the only one left "In," that would be me today. She put on her coat and walked out.

I prayed for the phone not to ring. Mary called first. We chatted for a minute and then she asked me to transfer her to TJ's voice mail. Of course, I had no idea how to do that and hung up on her. Nor was I of any help to a client who called to schedule an assessment for one of his employees. "Yes," I told him, "I am new." I then did the only reasonable thing and took the phone off the hook. As I sat there, I had to consider the very real possibility that I had made a very bad decision. Six years in graduate school at Yale and here I was answering phones. I had walked away from a tenure-track position at one of the best schools in the country and was now sharpening pencils. I felt a wave of nausea rush over me and considered simply walking out and leaving a note. Of course, I would be sure to push my magnetic circle to the "Out" column.

The time from 1:00 to 5:00 passed more slowly than any previous four hours of my life. As I sat at my desk, I thought of the *Seinfeld* episode where George had gotten a job but had been given nothing to do and spent the day sharpening pencils and throwing them like darts into the fiberboard ceiling. I seriously doubted anyone would notice. I glanced over at the dying plants and realized that this was not an environment in which plants or people could thrive. At 5:00, I pushed my circle to "Out" and went home. I slept little that night as my thoughts raced between "What have I done?" and "Surely things will get better once I meet with John."

On the second day, I was the first to arrive at at 8:30 and again waited for Sherry to unlock the door at 8:59. Upon seeing me, she looked surprised and said, "You're back." Apparently, she gave me more credit than I deserved. I checked "In."

I spent the first part of the morning visiting the office plants and staff. The plants seemed livelier. I could not say the same of my colleagues. I had brought in my laptop and replied to e-mails and read the news. When John checked "In" at 10:30, I felt an incredible sense of relief. He greeted me enthusiastically and congratulated me on finding my desk. I twitched as I realized that the bar was even lower than I had imagined. He told me that he had a great idea; he was taking me shopping to get office supplies for my desk. I assured him that I had plenty of well-sharpened pencils.

We returned an hour later with several bags of supplies—almost all of which I knew to be well organized in the stock room. John suggested that I get my desk outfitted and then come in to see him. I was so anxious to actually get to work that I left most of the supplies in their bags and shoved them into the desk drawers. Five minutes later, I was standing in front of John's office; he was on the phone but motioned for me to come in and sit down. I sat and waited, and waited. I picked up a book on his coffee table and started reading. He kept holding up his forefinger and gesturing, "One more minute." Thirty minutes later he wrapped up the call and said, "Time for lunch. Come on, I'm buying." I smiled at Sherry as I walked by the board and signed "Out."

While at lunch, I was able to direct the conversation away from college basketball long enough to get some direction regarding my "work." (It would prove to be the most focused and informative meeting of my short tenure.) My first and most important responsibility was to validate the assessment instrument that served as the core business product of the business. The instrument was marketed as a personality and behavioral assessment that could predict employee performance and was being used by several Fortune 500 companies to make hiring, promotion, and placement decisions.

The instrument had been purchased several years earlier from a psychologist who assured Mary and John that it was valid and reliable, although he did not provide any documentation. I took the test, read the computer-generated report, and sensed immediately that it was a bad instrument. With the raw data of several thousand completed reports, it did not take me long to confirm my suspicion. The instrument failed even the most basic tests of reliability and validity. In fact, some of the scales and the

manner in which they were scored made no sense at all. Had I still been teaching statistics and survey development, this would have served as an ideal example of what not to do. The report, which was generated and used to make decisions about people's careers, had all of the validity of a fortune cookie.

I explained my findings to Mary and John as straightforwardly as possible and let them know that they needed to immediately stop using the instrument. Put simply, they were committing fraud. John and Mary listened without comment and then asked me to step outside the door. After a few minutes Mary called me back in and said, "I think that pulling the instrument would confuse our clients." I was speechless. Mary asked if I could revise it—she liked this idea because they could then market it as a new and improved version. I told her that it might be possible to create a similar-*looking* instrument but that the majority of existing items would have to be thrown out. I also told her that the development and validation process would take several months.

I spent the next six weeks creating, testing, editing, and retesting items. After a dozen different versions I met with John and Mary to let them know that we were ready to begin the pilot study. As part of the research plan, four hundred employees from their largest client were to be surveyed. Mary praised me for a job well done and told me that plans had changed: there would be no pilot study. She had confidence in me and the new instrument. The marketing person was already working on a press release announcing the "New and Improved" version as immediately available. Speechless, I walked out.

I e-mailed John and Mary from home and apologized for sudden departure. I reminded them of the importance of following the research plan and asked them to reconsider their decision. No response. The next morning I arrived at work early and typed my resignation letter. As soon as John arrived, I asked if he and Mary had reconsidered. He said that they really appreciated my hard work and were "happy" with the instrument as it was. I told him that I was glad they were happy but that wasn't a substitute for empirical research and handed him my resignation. I collected my things, watered the plants, wished them good luck and slid my circle to "Out".