

River City

WINTER 2004
Volume 24, Issue 1

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LEADERFUL

DOUG

Ever since 9/11 I've been waking up at six-fifteen weekdays and doing the elliptical trainer. I need the exercise to crank up the endorphins. I also get to see Nina before she's out the door at seven. She teaches the second grade. She loves the kids, except maybe for Mitchie, who has been pulling out all the paper towels in the boys' room lately and wiping up pee on the floor. This morning she left with a bike-messenger bag over her shoulder, a thermos in one hand and, in the other, a Whole Foods bag full of books she had borrowed from the library for a unit on castles, plus, pinched at the last second, a bag of empty egg cartons, which the kids use for sorting things. Our breakfast nook is being guarded right now by an empty coffee bag, which she turned inside out. On one panel of the silvery lining she drew circles for eyes in blue Magic Marker. Protruding from the inside-out sidewalls are round, plastic valves that allow coffee gasses to expire and prevent oxygen from getting in. Doug, I think we can make robots, she said this morning, studying it before she stuffed herself out the door.

My job, well—the windows are one of the few things keeping me here. Suffice it here to say we're becoming a customer-intimate organization, we even treat employees as customers of information, and I'm the manager of corporate knowledge content.

GARRY

Doug, let's see...is one of your high-functioning types: he likes to talk about your emotional quotient and how you should never miss an opportunity to make an ally. And how a solo performance is good, but a group performance is better. Well, stand back—I may have hayseed in my hair, but I know enough to keep copies of everything I have ever written around here. You learn to cover your ass, sure, because otherwise someone will crawl up inside it. Cindi, my wife, says I make fun of business sometimes because I'm a creative. I do gravitate towards the artistic types who need the day job. Frank, for instance, edits corporate videos. Frank took a photography workshop and decorated his cubicle with some of his startling work. He also took nudes of the model, but keeps those locked up in his lateral file in a folder marked MODEL RELEASES. I asked him to do portraits of my family. He has the talent. After unloading a Jeep Cherokee full of

lighting equipment, he took three contact sheets worth of pictures with his Hasselblad. The contacts are all we've seen so far. Frank told me the other day he hasn't made prints since that workshop, four years ago. He also won't accept payment, even to cover out-of-pocket expenses. All he wants is to be taken out to dinner. Just feed me, Garry, that's all I ask in return, he says. I don't think he was joking.

I have a thirty-thousand-dollar studio in my basement where I come up with some really neat sound effects, which I'm trying to sell. I've made five CDs of custom effects. I'm trying to get them into the hands of movers and shakers. I also have a concept for a quiz show on My Generation TV, the cable station AARP is piloting in Lansing. The show'd be called "Name That Effect." One question would be: What's the *pkowwww* sound that comes right at the beginning of Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love." It sounds like a gun going off, or maybe it's the tape starting—I've played it a hundred six times and still don't know. Which tells me that's a fifty-thousand-dollar question right there.

MEL

Chase and I are building a home at Hawk's Landing. It's a new golf course development. Doug calls it Pigeon's Perch, so obviously he's jealous. Chase plays golf. I just drink. That's a joke. Okay? I'm the manager of public affairs. I love the view from our office windows, but more I love the money this job pays. I used to do community relations for the Michigan Diabetes Association. What a pain those volunteers are. You couldn't pay me enough to go back to nonprofits. PR pays so much better. I'm also very good. You don't want to get on the wrong side of me. Mel, you're a pit bull with AIDS. That's what Chase says. Totally, it's true, I am! I'm a pit bull with AIDS. Chase also works for the company. He's in financial reporting. I know that sounds awful, but he's so much fun. He really is. You'd love him. You would. He's not from Michigan, which is the first thing everyone notices about him. He's from LA. He studied drama and accounting at UCLA. We met at Disneyland, where he was in a dance troupe. My senior year I was drum majorette for the Flint Memorial High School Marching Band. We were in the Parade of Roses. The day before, we went to Disneyland, and it was love at first sight. And I've never been with anyone since. We've been married eighteen years. Half my life. It's so hard to believe. We also never thought we'd live in Lansing. Chase is so fun, and he's photogenic enough to be an actor—in a major way—but he's also very security-minded. So am I. My family is all here. I'll be at this company forever. We're one of over 30 couples who work here. Isn't that crazy?

GARRY

I make no attempt to see very far into the future. Because how would I know when my perspective might change? Plus I seriously believe that the world will stand back for me when I am ready to do things...*especially* if I still have hayseed in my hair, sure. For now, cube dwelling is not so bad. Not for our division. Most of the company should be called Beigeland. The partitions are flimsy and covered in a cloth only slightly nicer than basmati rice bags. And the work surface is a black or gray metal desk. Nothing modular. Our division has modular cubes the company was considering buying a few years ago for the campus-wide renovation, which is finally under way. The cloth on our partitions is a silvery-gray-on-medium-gray, with a semi-shiny sheen. The pattern at first glance seems like something you'd see inside an airplane, but up close, the repeating elements are amorphous. I told my boss Doug once that I see the shapes of birds and disembodied wings, blue crabs with molting shells, other crustaceans, and a couple of spiny, fossilized things thrown in every few inches for good measure. Then the theme, he said, must be sky and sea. Or sea that becomes land. It could represent something like that, he said. Something paleocenic, to use his word. Or it might be, he said, subliminally positioning human capital as the life form between birds and shellfish. That's a pretty provocative thing for a manager to say, even in a creative area like ours. But I think it was Doug's way of saying the company believes in positioning people for success, not extinction; while having fossils in the pattern—in the right proportion—serves to warn us of what we do not want to become. Or, it could be a way of pointing fingers at those around us who aren't team players and don't want to be a part of the new leaderful culture. He didn't use the word leaderful, but that's what he meant. And color always means a lot: beige could be considered, Doug said, the color of lifetime employment, which we don't have anymore. Silvery-gray birds and wings and mollusks and fossils might subliminally suggest, he said, that if we don't fly, if we don't produce the pearls, the company would be within its rights to position us for success elsewhere.

DOUG

We have these things called 360-degree reviews. Here's this from the intranet article that went out a few weeks before the 9/11 attacks:

Our 360 Degree Feedback Tool

by Chip Filson, Senior Vice President, Human Capital

As you know one of our core competencies is to be leaderful. [For our Intranet series on the Core Competencies of Customer Intimate Organizations, [click here](#). For the Nine Principles of Leaderful Behavior in Today's

Rapidly Changing Marketplace, [click here.](#)] Therefore, our Senior Leadership Team believes no one better than peers, direct reports, and a manager can tell you how you are doing as an effective leader. “Leadership is all around you, and when you are a leader, your own influence is all around for everyone else to learn from. Therefore, giving your peers, direct reports and manager your honest, anonymous appraisal of their work is essential to not only becoming a High Performing Sales Organization (HPSO), but also a high performance leadership organization (HPLO),” said Company President and CEO Phillips Welbourne.

I didn’t write the article, because Filson has his own communications person. I did draft Welbourne’s quote, but Welbourne’s administrative AVP, Darlys, rewrote me. I am proud that I rode Garry for not capitalizing high performing leadership organization consistent with High Performing Sales Organization before he launched the article. My unit has discretion over style matters like capitalization. You’d think a professional writer-editor making fifty-four grand a year would get the concept of parallel construction. That he doesn’t goes to the heart of the company’s training philosophy, which is that you have to train employees all the time because you cannot take it for granted that people want to be leaderful.

Anyway, managers had to send their 360-degree-review scores to their immediate supervisor by the Friday before Christmas that year, along with their 2002 LIM, which stands for Leadership in Management, which is basically a goals and objectives plan.

GARRY

Doug throws words around. We also make fun of his shoes, which he always keeps polished. Mel was at his house once and says by his side door he has a double shoe polisher like they have at the ritzy hotels. What a snob. He’s going to ruin corporate casual for us.

But he might have been on to something as regards our partitions, sure. The fly or be extinct theme is harsh, even if it is subliminal. Which may explain why, in the actual renovation, the company is installing cubicles with a pale green cloth in an easy geometric pattern, with matching gray-green work surfaces and mauve accents in the common areas. The renovated areas of the company look like a brand new medical clinic.

We’re lucky the renovation hasn’t reached us in the Phase IV building yet, because it also involves relocation. Of the forty-one worker bees in our division, I’m one of fifteen with a window. Doug has one and a half windows making up

a whole wall in his space. Managers have bigger cubicles. The AVP he reports to and his SVP have fiberboard offices covered in white patterned plasticized fabric that reminds me of my son's diaper changing table. When they move us to the basement of the Phase V building, as they're planning in a couple of years, I'll follow my original dream and become an English teacher. I'd like to share my real-world experience with tomorrow's leaders. It won't happen without sacrifice: beginning teachers make half of what I do as a corporate newsletter editor, but I'll have summers off. Cindi and I are looking forward to spending whole summers in Paris. Cindi works in the call center. I can't tell you how many married couples work at the company. A lot.

DOUG

That Tuesday morning I was alone in the elevator, so I did my thing: smile as big as I could while looking at my reflection in the plastic screen covering the digital floor indicator. The screen is tilted down, so it's like looking up at a shiny black TV monitor, except for the green readout that tells what floor you're on. Whenever I'm alone in the elevator on the way up to my floor I look up at the screen and smile like this: I push my cheeks way up towards my eyes, as far as they can go; right up until the lids are nearly forced shut. Sometimes I do it until it hurts. The chief sales officer told a group once that he did that whenever possible. It's scientific, he said: you can make yourself feel better by smiling. Mood mimics mouth muscles. It's very helpful knowledge. I try the trick every workday morning so I can greet my troops happy. I'm not sure if it really makes me happy, but it looks as though I've been smiling, which makes other people seem glad to see me, which makes me more tolerant of them.

GARRY

Doug started losing power when the first tower fell down, plain and simple. I know not all managers become great leaders when their time comes. Around here, sure, most don't. Doug...he sure didn't. I remember that morning, he exits the elevator and sees two or three of us scribes, plus a project manager and account exec from marcom across the hall, and a couple of folks whose names I don't know from one of the customer intimacy teams down the hall, all standing in front of viscom's TVs, and he doesn't come over right away. I remember flashing on his leather briefcase, which looks like Dr. Carter's on *ER*. Eight or ten folks not normally in the same place together are standing in a semi-circle outside of AV in front of a TV on top of an AV cart, and Doug doesn't realize we're all in shock.

DOUG

I'm dumping my shoulder bag off in my cubicle as usual, but before I can head over to where all these people are standing in front of a TV, Mel speaks from her side of the panel that holds our computer shelves and overhead cabinets, and separates our work stations. I see her face in the mirror the office lighting made of the window.

You're a New Yorker, she says. You should see that.

When it's overcast, which it was that morning in Lansing, or early evenings when it's dark enough, Mel and I trade information while looking at the other's reflection in the pane of glass that runs from near the end of my space into the start of hers. That moment I started studying through her face and over her head the evergreens and maples separating the C parking lot from the sidewalk; and across Tilden Road, about a third of the way up a blue-green grassy hill, the Wilbur E. Wriston Park basketball court, where a few of my staffers play at lunch. A picnic shelter, wood, painted dark brown, two stories high with tables and barbecue pits all around, tops the hill. Beyond the crest I searched for the capitol, but I can only see it when the air is dry. I've listened to Mel's stories while looking into her eyes and through her forehead, pinkish with green and concrete undertones, skimming the distance for signs of seasons changing, or following the crows that have daily conventions outside our building. I learned to check the foreground now and then for her tells: a crinkling around the eyes that says, It's a happy story about the house Chase and I are building. Chase. A guy who, when he gets loaded, asks are you getting any on the side, meaning are you freelancing, who says there's only one kind of vodka to put in martinis, and to never eat any kind of nut except raw cashews. Or, lookime, it's about how she's helping Vaughn switch from culinary to police courses at the community college. Vaughn is a Ugandan orphan-refugee Mel and Chase somehow managed to adopt when he was little, who believes Idi Amin was his father. Or I'll look for the furrowed brow, the kaleidoscopic caterpillars that tell me Mel is planning yet another vendetta against our AVP, who was hunting for moose in remotest Alaska the week of the 9/11 attacks. When I dropped my bag on one of the lateral file cabinets that serve as a credenza underneath my windows, it looked outside like an Irish early morning. The tint was Coke bottle green. Mel's eyes glinted. With ambition? Glee?

I joined the group in time to see the first tower turned to dust. I looked back and Mel was hunched over her desk, filling out paperwork. Maybe we had customers in the towers, maybe not, I didn't know. No one I knew worked at the World Trade Center, not family, not friends from when I lived in New York. The one thing I knew then was that we'd want our CEO, Phillips Welbourne, to know what was happening. Our senior leadership team was on retreat near Galveston. They were unlikely to be watching the news. I walked over to Mel's

cubicle. She was rifling through yellow charge card receipts, filling out an expense form. The AVP had left her in charge of crises.

Call Welbourne, I say. This will have implications for the company.

MEL

When the CEO says write a memo, I don't say, Philly, I'm your PR lady, remember, not an admin. I do it. Our field needed to know what they should do—drive home? Drive to appointments? Wait in airports? What was happening with the airlines? We fed them the most current information possible. I also helped him communicate with customers on our website. Our website is terrible, it's full of product stuff no one reads, and why should they, we don't have a product focus anymore. Doug is a good writer, so I asked him to help. Everyone has to pitch in during a crisis. But when people he needs to talk to don't return his calls promptly, he complains to me through our partition. I'm not getting callbacks, he says. So I pick up the phone and call the person's boss. The writers here, they don't get things done – they just think. Doug puts out good knowledge content, but he's so frustrating. Always thinking. Quality this, quality that. Not everything is the sweetest part of the chicken. Sometimes quality has to take a back seat. Sometimes you just have to put the stuff out there. The problem is he thinks people read whatever he writes. I don't. I don't even have time to read the paper, we're so understaffed in PR. He has tons of people sitting around. So I told the onsite leadership team I needed his people to help me get stuff written, and they said teamwork comes first. Doug talks a good game about group performance, but he gets pissed when I say I need his help, I have too much on my plate, I can't worry about all the little details, I need to focus on the big picture, you take care of the details. God is in the details he says. I say I don't believe in God, I'm sorry. That's not what I meant, he says. Then say what you mean, I say, we are having a crisis. He gets red in the face, and when he does that, with his green eyes, he looks like the devil. Very scary.

DOUG

Mel's doing this power-grab before the Pentagon is even hit, and nobody's asked me yet if I have any friends or family who worked at the twin towers. Everyone around me is from Michigan: half of them are from Lansing, there's a few from around Detroit, and a whole contingent from the Upper Peninsula. DaYooPee, DaYooPee. I wish newspapers paid better. I'd get the hell out. My fondest memories are of newsrooms. I covered sports, high school sports, all over Westchester and Upstate New York, before I went into magazines, and now this. I met the assistant sports editor of the Detroit *Free Press*, asked him about stringing, of-

ferred to cover the preps around Lansing, and he says sure, but you realize it'd take up whole weekends, and you couldn't file in the bureau office, you'd have to file from home. I'm at that stage of life where I don't want to give up entire weekends. And I told him I really want to work in a newsroom again, so it didn't pan out. But some day.

Garry, or maybe Neal, I tell whichever one it was I just found out my sister-in-law saw both towers come down from her office in Union Square, and that I have a cousin, it turns out, who worked in the north tower, but was running late that day. It was Garry I told. He looks at me like I'd just told him scientists discovered space aliens supplied the one and a half percent of human DNA that doesn't come from chimps.

Mel spent most of the day of the attacks huddled with a team of company officers who hadn't gone to the leadership retreat. The few times she was at her workstation we barely looked at each other in the window. She started giving me assignments that afternoon, called me over to her cubicle or came over to mine, always holding her fake-leather company memo pad holder before her stomach, crossing things off a several-page list. Power-tripping. I didn't fall into place.

And so—for a time, anyway—we started doing stuff maybe only PR people know is insidious. The next day, she was talking to Vaughn about his fees for the winter semester. I'm listening, and there's a pause, and then she says: Oh, no, hon, you can't just kill whining bastards. I'm really, really sorry, but you really can't.

That same afternoon, I'm on with Nina. She's telling me about some talk she had with the principal, and I say outright: Histrionic?! That's not a word people still use, is it? And of course, Nina says what in the hell's the matter with you? But I continue: That's a term of mental illness. People shouldn't just throw it around. It's a reputation issue, by God.

The next Monday, I open my desktop icon to read my 360s. I'd sent the electronic questionnaire earlier in the month to twelve people in the company: the AVP, my direct reports, and five peers including Mel.

The way it works is, each responder answers fifty questions broken out by our five core competencies, grading on a numerical scale. At the end there's a comments section. And these had to be Mel's:

Doug is thought highly of for leading a new culture in content knowledge, but needs to think more beyond his area and see issues from the companies perspective. For example when a situation seems negative it really is not, it is positive if you talk to the next person, make that extra call. We are a leaderful organization and if he only believes it would help the company achieve it's mission and vision. Also, you should walk around more and ask how people are

doing. Moral is better when the leader is positive!

I print two copies, show one to the AVP, who's back from Alaska, figuring he'll get my 360s anyway in December and talk with me about them at my annual review sometime in January.

I can't believe she's using 9/11 against me, she's a self-dramatizing nut, I say.

She thinks she has good people skills, he says, but she doesn't. But she has good instincts. Although she can't write her way out of a paper sack.

He takes up a pen, puts carets after the misspellings, writes in sic, sic, sic.

That evening around six o'clock, Darlys summons me, Mel, and our AVP and SVP to Welbourne's office. He wants to talk about what he'll say the next morning, a week after the attacks, at an employee town hall meeting.

Welbourne's office can hold all forty-one of our division's cubicles, and the walnut desk he's slumped behind when we arrive is as big as two of my panels laid end to end.

Darlys and our VPs stand. Mel and I take seats in low leather chairs in front of the desk. The chairs are slung so low our heads stick up no more than a child's would.

He greets Mel warmly. She's been helping him plan the event. They've spoken or met many times on all sorts of 9/11 PR by now.

Me, he looks at and says: Doug. Keeping out of trouble?

Pretty much, I say.

When we bat around talking points to end tomorrow's session, Mel suggests he end by saying let's roll.

Our AVP and VP squirm to show they're thinking.

Welbourne says, finally, We can't say that. That's taking advantage of tragedy. He looks at Mel: There's a difference between taking advantage of a situation and leveraging it. Do you see? Then he goes back to nursing his Diet Dr Pepper. His sleeves are rolled up. The shirt is blue oxford, straight-collared. He's a big rugged guy, from Montana. His hair has been cut in the same style and been the same shade of brown on top for four years now, and for the first time I realize he wears a rug; and the Karastan of toupees it is: short, plush, not flashy, softly shiny in the way only something made of natural fibers can be.

Darlys says, How 'bout, Let's roll with all due caution.

Our VPs are posturing by the windows, but she's behind Welbourne's right shoulder. She's more powerful than anyone in the company except for Welbourne and maybe the chief sales officer. Before her in the position was Jillene, a stormy Welsh immigrant who threw her tits and fury around until one evening at a United Way banquet—it's the rumor, anyway—she introduced Welbourne's mother, Harriet Welbourne, to our congressman using Welbourne's wife's name, Candace Welbourne. She didn't correct herself. I've met both Mrs. Welbournes,

and if I were the congressman, I could only have concluded that living with Welbourne ages a woman something terrible. Darlys, though: In the company cafeteria, at noon, when the white-collar wage slaves start queuing up in front of the four harried cashiers—scores of people, lost in their thoughts or chatting amiably, holding cafeteria trays loaded with the day's special, kung pow chicken or giant hard-shell taco salad bowls, or the comfort foods du jour, meatloaf or mac and cheese, or burgers or chicken breast sandwiches on whole wheat buns from the grill, or make-it-yourself salads with spring mix and three kinds of sprouts and everything else you could ask for—Darlys Kinney is the woman you'd look at first. She's as tall as I, five-eleven, stands erect, has begun to ripen in her early thirties, has big brown eyes, light brown hair, a roundish face, and a small, hawkish nose.

I like engaging her in front of Welbourne. So I say: What if Phillips would say, Let's be careful out there. Like the sergeant used to say on *Hill Street Blues*.

Will people remember that, the AVP asks.

That was a big hit, the SVP says.

I remember it, Welbourne says.

How about, Let's roll out there, Mel says.

Welbourne scrunches his nose like he's smelled an auditor.

Let's be *leaderful* out there, I say.

Welbourne looses a coy grin, then uncorks an apple-cheeker that softens the hard planes and angles of his face.

I give Mel an earnest we're-all-in-this-together nod. The word she used in the 360. I can smell the blood vessels burn on her cheeks.

Roll, she says, says get on a roll. It suggests movement. It's positive.

Welbourne exhales my words: *Let's be leaderful out there*.

Says it all, the AVP says.

Does, the SVP says.

It's very team-oriented, I say.

Mel?

Welbourne wants her buy-in.

You're the CEO, she says, gnomishly. I can't think of anyone else who knows what our employees want to hear, any better than, more than, the way you do it.

Well then, adds the AVP.

With Mel down, I resist slamming her on her 360. But I do lay on more of my whispering campaign. One day Nina phones to tell me what her kids did in the morning, and I blurt out: No, roasted salted cashews—the only people I know who eat raw cashews are gay guys.

Gaudencio Levine, an editor at *New York* magazine, where I was a fact-

checker, introduced me to raw cashews. We were walking back to the office one day from lunch and stopped off at a health food store, and he bought a bag full. Gaudencio was dying from AIDS. Then, there's Chase, who professed his admiration for the sweet raw nut.

Right after the cashew comment, I sat so the conical shade of my task lamp blocked Mel's reflected face. At the bottom of the window, though, I noticed a small, delicate hand hovering over the phone. Mel thrummed the dial pad left-handed. She was wearing a thin gold bracelet. Her nail polish was red. The fingers glowed like a lab specimen in the greenish reflection of the glass. They were a fat pale spider marching in place. I heard her clear her throat.

GARRY

Our Christmas parties are one of the best things about working here. We have almost eighteen-hundred employees. More than half of them come to the party with someone, so we always have to rent one of the biggest hotels in town. The meal is always awesome, and we each get two free drink tickets. The viscom folks do a slide show with people from the different sections of the company waving, and some of them wear Christmas hats. And there's always an employee talent show. Most of the employees sing country music or gospel or jazz. But this year has to be different, sure. I told Cindi I'm glad Mel put me on the planning committee. This way I can do something to help us all deal with 9/11. But Mel, she had a really good idea in a meeting today. She wants us to all hold hands and sing "God Bless America" and other patriotic songs. I'm in the company choir, so I said PR can definitely lead it. And she goes: Sweet. I told Doug after, to cover my ass, because he's not on the committee, and right away he says: Why not "This Land Is Your Land"? And I'm thinking: You're still trying to be smarter than everyone else, instead of coming together in a time of crisis.

DOUG

I grew a goatee, started wearing utility boots, cut down on small talk, thought my own thoughts. For instance, I used to think God's relationship to humans was like ours to pets. Now, I hoped not. I wouldn't want God treating me like I'd treated house cats. I interfered once when one of two cats we adopted from friends—they also had five dogs, and Nina and I were looking for a cat, so we took them in—started pooping on the other cat's sleeping mat. I wrathfully one morning put the cat who was shitting for dominance out on the porch with a little food, water, and a disposable baking pan full of litter, and called the people we adopted them from, and told them to pick her up. Then I didn't apologize to our friends for weeks, because I was so outraged to see that the gone cat had

bitten or scratched the weaker one, the one we kept, on the stomach, around the nipples; and the weaker one was left with an abscess, which she licked for weeks before it finally healed. Me, God of judgment, God of vengeance, lord of unintended consequences. The poor pooping-angry cat couldn't have understood her banishment. Any more than we'd understand if God punished us. Better to keep a certain distance. I've come to hope we're no more differentiated in God's eyes than sunflowers would be to you or me if we passed a field of them at eighty miles an hour. That thought led me to a Census Bureau site with world population estimates for the years 1950 (2,555,078,074) to 2000 (6,080,141,683), and projections running out to 2050 (9,104,205,830). The chart was five screens long on my computer monitor at work. After looking at all those figures in the billions, billions didn't look like a lot.

Then I thought God could be powerful enough to see each of us, not to mention every sparrow that falls from a tree. And maybe too the way certain corporations post their revenue to inflate profits. But just as likely God merely sets the goals, creates the incentives. I doubt God sees everything.

Inspired, I gave Mel low scores on her 360, and left the comments section blank.