

RAVINDER CHAHAL



the group

reverb

© Ravinder Chahal 2005

The moral right of the author has been asserted

reverb is an imprint of Osiris Press Ltd

This edition first published 2005 by

Osiris Press Ltd
PO Box 615
Oxford OX1 9AL

www.readreverb.com
www.osirispress.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 1 905315 01 5

Set in Baskerville 12/14.2pt
Title font Mutagen (www.fontmonster.org)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from Osiris Press

Printed in Britain by
Lightning Source, Milton Keynes

reverb

13: LUBRICATION

Dennis still makes me nervous. He never seems to finish any of his sentences. And he has some disconcerting personal habits that make it difficult to retain eye contact. Blowing his nose on his tie. Tearing the corners off notepads and using the paper to clean between his teeth.

Maybe it's a deliberate ploy. The walls of his office are lined with those international business best sellers that share with us gems such as the seven previously unknown habits of highly effective people.

Perhaps he's testing out some radical piece of research from one of his books: 'How to gain the upper hand in a meeting and keep your opponent off-balance through farting, belching and picking your teeth.'

He does all of that and more in his meeting with me, during which he spends most of the time checking his emails and taking 'important' calls.

And he doesn't know my name. He keeps calling me Karim. It's all very tragic, as I don't correct him at my first and only opportunity. 'How do you feel about the new challenge Karim? Up for it?'

'Actually I'm not sure what it is yet.'

'The digital age Karim. That's the only game in town,' he says, swivelling round in his chair and throwing his arms wide open from his scrawny body as if he's rehearsing giving a keynote speech in front of an audience of his rapturous peers. 'It's the future. Our shared future. And it's already upon us. Are you ready for it? Are you ready for the future?'

His voice drops to a near whisper. He pauses to cue his killer-line. He looks directly into my eyes to ensure emotional buy-in and goes for the payoff.

'Are you ready for the future now, Karoosh?'

'Err, I think..'

'Yes you are Karrrrerm, yes you are,' his voice rising, as his eyes shift back to his screen. 'You're a switched on young man. You understand that technology is the key. You are the new wave, pushing forwards. The envelope, yes the leading edge. Pushing through. To the other side.'

He stops cold, as confused as me by what he has just said, but he quickly rallies and manages to push on.

‘We need people like you to drag Silverback forwards. Kicking and screaming if needs be.’

‘Yes Dennis, what exactly do you have in mind?’

He swivels in his chair to face me again, fiddling maniacally with his glasses. ‘Great things Karim. Great things. I need people like you with me. Are you with me?’

‘Err yes, I..’

‘Good, good. That’s what I like to hear. You see, Silverback, is like a big engine. Lots of cogs and gears. Interlocking, all vital. Working together, moving, unison, in unison, yes, forwards, meshing together.’

His words have started to trip into each other, as again he appears to work himself up into a twitchy fit. His eyes are glassy, and I feel as if I could almost slip away unnoticed.

‘And I’m the engineer,’ he pauses for a moment as if pleased by this new thought. ‘I look at the whole machine. I tweak and I twiddle. Order new parts. Tighten the screws, fix any leaks. Keep it ticking over smoothly and uhmm, headed in the right direction. Mmmm yes purring along. Smoothly. Like a big cat. A big, beautiful, ferocious cat.’

‘Yes, and how do I fit in?’ I ask with increasing alarm.

‘Oil and grease Karim, oil and grease.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘You are the oil, Karim. You are the grease. Oil for the engine to keep the gears from grinding. To keep the cat purring. I know you understand the business, but you stand slightly outside of it, so you’re uhmm, not a cog or a gear, you see.’

Just as I think he has blown himself out, he picks up a new thread and takes off again mumbling breathlessly. ‘And I know you understand technology, the benefits. You get to the core of it immediately, see past all the window dressing. That’s why I need you. Yes, I need you to be the oil for a new project. I need you to feed the cat. Lubricate it, so it slots smoothly into the Silverback machine.’

‘So what do you need me to do?’ I say over him. Both our voices rising in this airless little fishbowl office. I’m trying to talk over him to make him stop.

‘That’s what I like to hear Kerrrumm, Kerrrr yes that’s right, enthusiasm. Can do. This is a great opportunity for you, a real step up,’ he says shouting yet louder.

His eyes are darting round the room and he is now busily dismantling a biro. ‘We’re taking on the digital age. Grasping the ummm ...grasping it with both hands. You know how? Karrrr... do you know how?’

I shake my head at him, careful not to look at the sticky blue mess that now covers his hands and trousers. I’m getting short of breath.

I think I might be having an anxiety attack.

‘I’ll tell you, Kareesh. Let me tell you. We are going to build it together. You and I. We’re going to take it on. We going to stare into the void and we’re going to master it. Aren’t we Khalil?’

‘Yes. I mean no. I mean I don’t understand. What do you want me to do sir?’ My head is spinning. I feel frenzied and confused.

‘We’re going to make an... extranet,’ he sinks back into his seat, with a sigh, a dreamy look in his eye and a satiated glow to his face.

I feel as if I should say something; something that shows my awe and gratitude. But I stay silent and feel nothing but a creeping nausea at the thought that I’ve been violated in some unseen way.

Dennis is lying back in his chair; he flicks a lever and it tilts back to near horizontal. He seems to be staring sightlessly at the ceiling, licking his lips.

I can now see the hairy gap, between his Walt Disney socks and his frayed turn-ups. His shiny trousers have bunched up around his crotch.

His voice is now a low murmur. I can only catch every other word or phrase. ‘Linking it through to the website... feeding it all through... backend... knowledge management... Seamless. Beautiful... just beautiful.’

I’m not sure what this all means or what I’m supposed to say. I hear a strange voice that’s not my own, strangle out something like: ‘Extranet, sir. Fantastic sir. I couldn’t agree more sir. Do you want me to find a design agency sir, I’ve worked with Torrid sir, they’re a client sir, I’ve worked with them sir. I have sir.’

He turns his head slowly towards me, I can see a shiny line of spittle, drooling towards his chin. He wipes at it, leaving a blue smear

across his lips. I feel horrified. 'No need,' he says. 'We have all the capabilities in-house. We'll use our IT guys. Tap into their knowledge. Involve the designers. Get them together and let's rock and roll.'

'Yes sir, great idea sir, totally agree, sir.' By now I'll say anything to get out of there.

He lurches forwards towards me, his hand outstretched. I jump up to my feet, not sure of his intentions. But all he wants is to do, is give me the power-shake.

14: PEST CONTROL

Our building is being fumigated. The pest-controllers have turned up with poisons and masks. Canisters of gas and heavy-duty gloves. What look like traps and baits.

But no one knows why they're here. It's not clear what we're supposed to be infested with.

They were called in by the building managers. The building managers claim there was an emergency request from our office manager. Our office manager says she received an emergency order to evacuate the building from the building managers. At very late notice. Barely time to inform the staff and rearrange meetings.

Confusion reigns. Recriminations. Phone calls are made. Explanations demanded. The partners are not happy. Not happy at all. Dennis looks on. He's fascinated by the equipment.

He picks up a sprayer that's been set down while things are being sorted out and starts to fiddle with the sinister looking nozzle, pointing it directly towards his eye. Squinting. Looking right at it. Finger dangerously close to the trigger. Until he's noticed by a gruff looking pest-control technician with rock-and-roll sideburns and an impressive pompadour, and told to put it down. Immediately. Which he does. Red-faced. Twitchy.

A senior person from the management company turns up. He's got printouts of emails in his hands. From us to him.

Our office manager denies ever sending them. She quickly counters with faxes of her own. They eye each other suspiciously. And then the senior building manager man shows us why he's the

senior man. He points out that the faxes sent to us are on the correct fax paper etc etc, but they've been sent from the local copy centre. It's clearly visible in small print at the head of every faxed page.

Our office manager demands to look again at the emails that have been sent from her email account. And notices a small difference in the name of the sender. Her email address has a dot in it separating first name from second. The email address that is printed out on the senior building manager's paper trail does not.

Again he shows his worth. Shaking his head in a knowing way.

'What is it?' asks our office manager, clearly out of her depth.

'Can't you tell?' asks the senior building manager. 'Disgruntled employee. Clear case.'

I feel hot and guilty. But it wasn't me. I just wish it had been and have to wonder if it shows on my face.

'Want us to give you a once over anyway? As we're here like,' asks the gruff looking Elvis fan in the boiler suit.

15: PUSHERMAN

Tom and I are at it again. Drinking red wine when we should be at home. Just before six his resolve weakened, early in the week and he asked me if I fancied getting together for a quick one after work.

He knows something is up. As Quentin's right hand, he probably had some prior knowledge but no real details. And the rumours have already started.

I'd been seen in Quentin's office and then in Dennis' and the talk soon followed. Rhys and Gemma forming a hasty alliance to share intrigue and opinion. Rhys even making a clumsy attempt to engage me in pally conversation.

I'm surprised at the attention, but we're all a little bit bored I suppose. Other than the fact they might see something in it for themselves, either an opportunity to advance or a chance to vent some frustration, I don't really see why any one of them should care at all about what's happening to me. Office gossip I guess.

It's simply a distraction, a break in the monotony, and one that serves to illustrate how bad things are in our desperate little team.

When we're chugging along, we just accept and get on with it, but when an event gives us pause for thought, forcing us to examine ourselves and our relative position within the group, we have to acknowledge how awful the dynamic really is.

So as long as the issue remains unsettled and things are up in the air, we'll have paranoia, grumbling and chatter. Which is why Tom wants to get to grips with things quickly.

He is far more decisive and capable than Quentin, who instinctively leaves things for Tom to sort out. While some people insist that training and technique build management skill, it is in fact empathy and a human touch, which Tom has naturally in abundance.

He takes his time before broaching the subject. We talk instead about quitting Silverback as usual, leaving an open segue point for me to step through.

I resist for a while, and talk as if nothing is different, but Tom is patient. No pressure. He just lets me talk. It's difficult to hold out any enthusiasm for the deception with Tom. It takes two for that relationship to work. Sure, I could simply feed him inaccuracies, factual errors and misinformation, but you need somebody who will bite; a reaction of some kind, a change of behaviour that you have authored for any real satisfaction.

No Tom is too measured. Calm. He sees all sides and hears all the voices. Understands where people are coming from. And he won't rush. Not himself or those that he's dealing with.

So eventually I break off my holding pattern and tell him my news and ask what he thinks.

'Quentin said something about Dennis wanting you for a new job, but I didn't know what. Have you thought it through, I mean it sounds a bit sketchy, what does he expect you to do exactly?'

'Tom, to be honest with you, I don't really know what he wants. Or why he chose me. But it's a neat little solution: he wants someone to work on his pet project and Quentin needs to get rid of someone.'

Tom says nothing. A familiar trick. He'll gain more by listening than by spouting off. But for once I'm not buying it: I just don't feel the need to have him take my side and strangely, I don't really want to let off steam either.

'Tom. It is what it is. I can take it or leave it. My choice in the end.'

'Well yeah. You're right. Ok.'

Another pause.

'When you make up your mind, we can think about what you want to tell the others,' he says.

'I know you don't like Rhys and Gemma or Ben not knowing, but really, what's it to do with them? What's it matter what they think?' I ask, feeling a little annoyed, that I'm not at the centre of his thinking.

'It's just good for people to know what's going on.'

I can sense him bracing himself for an attack but I can't muster the energy. I am resigned to the fact that change has been forced upon me.

Instead I ask him something else. Perhaps to distract myself.

'Don't worry Tom, I understand. I'll let you know as soon as I decide. We can't keep them waiting and gossiping forever. But just think about it for a second; there are so many ways we could break the news you know? We could say anything. We could have a field day. Especially with Rhys. Don't you think?'

Again Tom waits for me to go on. He won't even want to bad-mouth Rhys, which is a common sport, without hearing more from me and getting the lay of the land first. I'm beginning to feel quite cheated, which is why I carry on, wanting to bait him into saying something.

'I could tell him whatever I want. He's so eager to hear something right now. He's primed and ready; he'd lap it up. Asking for it really. Almost a shame not to give him what he wants'

'What would be the point of that?' asks Tom warily.

'I don't know. Just for fun I guess. Just to see how far I could push it. You know what I mean. Don't you ever wonder how far you could take something like that? Just to see?'

'Not really, Khaled. It's not the sort of thing that gets me going.'

Something in the teacherly tone of his voice makes me quite unwilling to drop it now. So I keep pushing. Just a little further. To get that reaction.

'Don't come the innocent Tom. You could easily do it. You know you could.'

‘Yeah I could, but why would I want to? It wouldn’t be difficult to lie to someone. Especially someone like Rhys, so what’s the point?’

‘No that’s exactly it. That’s the reason right there. You said it yourself. “Someone like Rhys.” You’re right he’s easy. He so anxious and so blocked up, he wants to be told something. He’s waiting for it. You’d almost be doing him a favour. And whatever the lie is he’ll twist it round, and make it fit into his own little view of the world. He’ll make it true.’

‘Yeah so what does that prove? Rhys is a bit fucked-up. We all know that. There’s no need to go on about it. It might make him a bit vulnerable or a bit gullible. And I know he can be a pain, but still that’s no excuse. It’d be like picking on someone who’s smaller than you.’

‘No, you’re right, it would be. But you’re missing my point Tom. I’m not saying pick on someone easy just because you can. I’m saying I wonder how far you could take it. Not just Rhys. You’re right it’s obvious with him. He’s fucked up. But there must be something for everyone. Something that will make them want to believe.’

‘Well yeah. Everyone’s got a weak spot. We all like to think we’re not gullible but it just depends. It’s all about pushing the right buttons I guess.’

I wonder if I may have pushed some of Tom’s. His voice has a little more feeling to it. A touch of irritation, which suddenly has the blood pumping a little faster.

‘Yeah maybe, I don’t know. But that’s not what I mean. What I’m saying is. Once you know what it is. Whatever it may be. And the person is swallowing what you’re telling them. I just wonder how far could you push it.’

‘You know what mate? You’re beginning to sound like one of these wierdos now, Khaled. You know, one of those people whose neighbours say, “Oh I didn’t really know him. He kept himself to himself. But he seemed like such a nice polite young man,” says Tom laughing, a little tightly perhaps. ‘Just what is it you’d get people to do?’

‘No mate, you don’t understand. Lying to people is easy. You said it yourself. Getting them to do what you want probably isn’t that difficult either. I mean if you have enough conviction and sincerity,

you can get them to believe what you say and get them to act on it. No, the thing I’m talking about is, how far can you really take it? I mean, could you lie to someone, get them hooked? Get them believing in something because they want to, for whatever reasons they have of their own, and then tell them it was all a lie? Would they listen to you then or would they just want to keep believing the lie that they’ve made their own?’

Tom is looking at me. Silent again. The thought I’ve just expressed is new to me. Maybe something that doesn’t sound so good out loud. A little intense, or perhaps just weird like he says.

I’ve pushed and prodded perhaps a bit too far. I fall silent and look away from Tom’s face. I reach for the bottle of wine that sits empty on the table between us. I put it back down and attempt to pull myself back over the line.

‘Listen mate, I don’t know what I’m going on about. Just talking shit. You know I’ve got a lot on my mind at the moment and I just need to stop thinking about it and make a decision. I’ll let you know as soon as I do. The way I’m feeling, I’ll probably give it a go. I may not have much choice but you know it may be a good thing. I could do with a change. Yeah, I’ll probably give it a go. See what happens, hey? But I’ll definitely let you know as soon as I know what I’m doing.’

16: ASK THE DUST, CRAB-KILLER

Dennis’ big project. A total nightmare from start to early finish. Our Chief Engineer certainly talks a good game. And he definitely left his mark on me. It took me two days to scrub away the last traces of blue ink he smeared across my hand.

He takes his cues from *Management Today*, *The Wall Street Journal* and Harvard Business School. Heroic visionary thinking, laid out in tough bombastic words. I’ve read the articles. They’re all very do or die. But short on detail.

And when I look to Dennis for direction or even a practical brief of some kind it becomes apparent that he has no idea what any of this involves. Neither do I.

My team is no help either. A couple of sullen IT support staff that talk in impenetrable code, and then moan that no one understands what they do. And two designers who both wish they were working in an advertising agency or a fashionable magazine, rather than being asked to produce crappy covers for reports and corporate brochures.

They are nothing but delinquent attitude; overgrown boys who refuse to grow up. And like all boys they like to bully. They try to intimidate me. Again unwilling to share the precious secrets of their trade. Precious. Haughty. Difficult. Little princes who look down at people who do not share their obsessive minority interests.

And at the bottom of the pyramid there is Sammie, a young, awkward, put-upon assistant. Very pale skin. Shy. Uninspired. Clumsy. Quiet. A shoe-gazer.

All of us stuck at the end of corridor next to the stationary cupboard, opposite the photocopiers. From little acorns. Yeah right.

An invisible team of backroom support staff misfits. I soon realise why I've been asked to do the job. No one else in the company would take it. I wasn't the first to be asked. In fact I wasn't really asked at all. And when they tried to hire someone in to do the job, they couldn't find anyone for less than sixty-five grand a year.

And the job soon becomes scaled down; all of it put on the back-burner in less than a month, when it becomes apparent that there is no budget, a total lack of skills and complete resistance from everyone within the company.

So I'm left in charge of the photocopying and PC-crash crew. Dennis tells me it's an opportunity. Open-ended. Tap into their skills. Unlock their potential. Lead them into new areas.

He says that he wishes that it were him in my shoes. Just before he forgets all about us. He's onto his next new project, something about producing video broadcast releases for our clients. Apparently it's the future of PR.

☆

So here I am in complete limbo. I have absolutely nothing to do any more. No role to perform. Quentin won't take me back and if I kick up too much of a fuss with Dennis I could end up losing my job.

I'll have to keep turning up and try to look busy. Sounds ideal but

very soon the novelty wears off and the boredom kicks in.

And there is a particular grinding texture to the boredom I endure in the silence of an office in which I have become an employment zombie. I just turn up to pick up my pay and sit silent for days on end.

I remember those long colourless afternoons of unemployment where the enemy was loneliness. Loneliness that comes from the fear of facing people who might guess what you are.

Now there is nowhere to hide away. I'm highly visible and exposed on all sides, but I'm still as cut off as ever from the moist, warm bodies that breathe the same air as me.

Minutes turn to treacle. I sit and wait. Breakfast runs. Email checking. Mid-morning coffee. Newspapers. The joy of lunch, which you put back as long as possible, so it will eat into the afternoon. Toilet breaks. Popping round to see people you don't really like to say hello. Anything that takes you away from the prison of your desk. And then just watching the clock, waiting until someone speaks, or someone leaves so you can follow.

There have been other times when the task in hand has been so brutally mindless and repetitive, I have managed to escape my physical body to daydream away the hours. Sometimes the technique of the job itself can even become a focus for abstraction, so that every bag of sawdust I stuffed or plate I washed would become a triumphant masterpiece in itself.

But even this becomes an impossibility when your days are utterly blank. A boredom discount factor comes into effect, proving that everything is always entirely relative. I crave the solace of people and conversations that I would normally walk to other side of the road to avoid. And find myself reading story after story from a vast array of news sources on the internet, not so much to absorb the information, more to simply give myself a task that takes up some time.

I wander aimlessly around, lost on the web, clicking one link after the next, searching for something to amuse. I download music that I'll never listen to again, disks and disks of it. I've become an obsessive collector, trying to capture and catalogue something that I know will never be complete. I shop online and take part in auctions for obscure junk. I've signed up to numerous alerts, desperate for the trivia and

the amusement that I've always scorned others for seeking out and wasting their time on.

But worst of all I've become a pest, because I share each minute detail of every last thing I'm up to. The type of person who interrupts others who are trying to work. Who starts off stories that have no end, or middle, or any meaning at all. I hover when others are talking. I butt in and I jar the nerves of those upon whom I have imposed my presence. I've even attempted to write one of those stupid emails that you hope will be passed on from person to person around the world.

And then there are other things that I do that border on the bizarre. Little jolts of anarchy inspired by the pest controller. Minor stuff that alleviates the unyielding nature of the day. I never flush when I've gone to the loo, leaving a little surprise for the next person who happens along. I steal a page out of every newspaper that sits in the common room. I readjust people's seats and the height of the screens. I misfile documents and return folders upside down and out of sequence in the shared archive. I take things from desks and leave them elsewhere. Whenever someone is away from their desk, I leave them voicemails that are garbled, unclear, but mention their names. And their client names. I leave cryptic messages on whiteboards, in meeting rooms and on photocopiers all over the building. Little nonsensical pieces of surreal poetry, that mean nothing but scream insanity.

But I know I have a shadow. Someone more prolific and inventive than even myself. He is the arch prankster, who works on a grand and daring scale. His is a sustained campaign that has gone largely unnoticed but has targeted us all. And he now has a name.

We were all sent a beautifully wrapped empty box, marked with the name Arturo B. We opened it and cast it aside, vaguely disappointed at the thought of yet another pointless teaser campaign.

Several weeks later a desk calendar arrived, again marked Arturo, completely plain, but instead of marking the days of the week, it only showed the weekends, two weeks in August and the week from Christmas to New Year. The rest of the year completely blank. Again, no one really paid any attention; we looked at it in the morning, wondered what it was all about and forgot all about it by lunchtime.

Other little strange things kept happening but nothing you'd link together as part of a campaign, unless you know he's out there. I noticed a small sign buried on the noticeboard, alongside all the dated appeals for removals men, good plumbers in South London and details of people looking for non-smoking flatmates with GSOH to move in with. It simply said 'Help Wanted', signed AB.

Little labels from a Letraset started appearing around the office, in meeting rooms, in the kitchen and on people's desks, saying cryptic things like 'Bankrupt', 'My Other Car's a Ferret' and 'Work makes us free'. Stickers appeared in the lift next to the buttons and the display saying things like 'Floor 2 and half – sort of in between' or 'Going Down, Down, Down' or 'Now wash your hands'.

And then there are other things that continue to happen on an occasional basis that target specific people. Several of the partners, including Quentin, received gold embossed invitations to attend a gala dinner and awards show from DBX, the Directorate of Business Excellence, but when asked to RSVP on their behalf, their secretaries found themselves dialling a premium rate gay chat number called DIRTBOX.

Nothing's happened to me as yet, but just last week the Corporate Property team returned from a team lunch to find their screensavers set to a picture of an unknown black footballer. It was only the next day that they realised that their email signatures had been changed to read Arturo Blisset.

Nothing's happened to me yet, but I'm keeping my eyes and ears open. I wonder if Arturo, whoever he is, has noticed my own little acts of sedition. I can't imagine who he could be, but he has become a guiding light; I'd love to know what he thinks of my work even though I know I'm nowhere near his league. But even so, some acknowledgement would be nice. I imagine what it'd be like if we could work together, but there's simply no way either one of us can make ourselves known.

We'll each simply have to continue as autonomous cells of bored resistance, each of us doing what we can and making sure we don't get caught. But at least knowing that he exists, someone just like me, gives me hope, while searching for signs of his passing and clues to his identity helps break up the monotony of these fallow days.

17: LE PATRON EST FOU

Today is the first day of the rest of my life.

I've been ghost-walking for far too long. It's beginning to affect me. I'm regressing, turning into a shadow. At work I've gone days without speaking more than ten words to another soul.

And at home I just lock myself in my room, not sleeping because in my mind sleep has become the cousin of death. Instead I stay awake smoking weed every night with the door shut, making the entire flat smell stale. I sit there alone ignoring Jun when he comes to my door, asking me to turn the music down.

I'm so tired. My eyes are permanently red. And my skin is turning grey. Hanging from my sides. Fatty pouches from ice cream and salty snacks from strip-lit convenience stores at one in the morning.

My cough is deep and bubbling. I can't get hard, or even muster the energy to masturbate. But the thing that finally shakes me out of my haze is when I see blood in the toilet bowl after two days of constipation.

I have to pull myself together. This can't go on.

I know that work has been dragging me down, and so, I decide to meet the problem head on. I must throw myself into work. Throw myself into my team. With zeal and enthusiasm. For my own sake.

They are taken aback to say the least. Unresponsive. Resentful. Aggressive. Feathers all ruffled up. Squawking noise at me.

Whispering behind my back.

But there can't be any turning back because I know that my melancholy hasn't gone far. It's waiting patiently in the wings, keeping my dark thoughts company. They take a ticket and wait for their number to come up once again. The sticky green weed offers a helping hand. The red wine and vodka send me a postcard. Wish you were here?

And I know myself. I'm so very easily bored. Like a child. Disruptive. And distracted. I need something to keep me interested and amused.

It isn't going to be easy. I'm totally unsuited to this new job. I'm forced to face up to my limitations. Which isn't pretty.

Making decisions is a big one. It's not easy to admit, but now that I'm in the hot seat, commanding the enterprise, I find I'm no Captain Kirk.

Instead, I'm being exposed as a bit of a ditherer. And when I go the other way, against my natural disposition, I'm guilty of being rather too rash. A bridge-burner. Easily offended, defensive and somewhat spiky in my dealings with people.

I can feel myself becoming every useless boss I've ever had. I no longer produce anything of intrinsic value. I could so easily be airbrushed out of the picture. No-one would notice. And I'd have nothing to keep me from slipping back into that dark corridor I've just left behind.

I have to fill my time with something altogether more fulfilling. First day of the rest of my life. It has to be. For my own good.

I think again. I re-examine my position. Take stock. Re-evaluate.

I'm in charge. They have to do what I say. Daunting at first, but then I think 'what would Arturo do?' and eventually the possibilities become clear.

18: CHOCOLATE CAKE

My team is suffering from low morale.

In fact, all these cunts ever seem to do is moan about how no one takes them seriously or bothers to listen to them.

Which is true, but what do they expect? They have absolutely nothing to say.

Joe and Dave, our IT duo look as if the only female they've ever had came delivered in plain brown wrapping paper. And even then they'd probably spend more quality time with the instruction manual.

And then I have Stefan and Martin, our two design gurus, both devotees of postmodern cool. Aloof. Ironic. Disdainful. Grazing on culture like a pair of pure-bred sheep.

But take away the ill-advised haircuts, the geezer-boy accents, the Star Wars toys and the Lara Croft figurines that litter their desks, and all you have left is that unfortunate kid who got picked on at school for being too fat, too skinny or because he couldn't afford brand name trainers.

And finally there is Sammie. Our boyish assistant. Tall and skinny, yet to fill out, in a cheap static-electricity suit and clumpy slip-on shoes. Pale skin, blood thin lips but mostly silent and unseen. The one who causes me least trouble.

And it's my job to raise their self-esteem.

My only frame of reference is Quentin and his well-meaning attempts to boost moral.

'If you are not part of the solution, you're part of problem.' If I try hard enough I can almost hear his voice reciting his mantra.

I try to think how I can apply this thinking to my new situation.

The problem. The person who is not a team player. The disruptive influence. The one who can't take things seriously. Who won't join in. Refuses to take part. The boat-rocker.

How can you argue with logic like that? Either do as I say without question or be singled out as the problem.

God, that sort of shit used to drive me up the wall, but now that I'm a team leader, in a position of great trust and responsibility, I can, for the very first time, see the potential upside.

I even seem to be picking up the lingo.

And I can see that it will be essential to weed out any individual who won't go along with the group, even if the group is being led up the garden path.

With Arturo as my spirit guide I start to see for the first time that the peculiar ways in which we are expected to behave in the corporate environment lend themselves rather well to the ridiculous. And it's no great leap to move from the well intentioned to the purely mischievous.

I can think of plenty of examples of awful group exercises that I've had to endure, where we've all resentfully gone along with whatever misguided activity we've been asked to perform. Only in my case, it won't be misguided. But who, honestly, will be able to tell the difference?

I remember one trip to rural Ireland particularly well. If I can top that, I'll have done particularly well. Quentin's idea of a team-building weekend. All of us forced to wear corporate fleeces and brightly-coloured baseball caps at all times. Quentin yelping like an exuberant puppy, asking us over and over to guess what he had in store for us.

A predictable schedule of orienteering, mountain biking and an army-style assault course in the driving rain. Encouraged to work together to solve mental and physical challenges, shouting half-hearted Americanisms to gee each other along.

I remember sniffing and sneezing and stumbling in the leafy mud as the day just refused to come to an end, until Rhys vomited decisively through a combination of cold and fear as he stood shivering and unwilling at the top of a rope slide. Gemma, already close to tears, tipped over the edge into hysterical screaming as the oily yellow liquid showered down onto our upturned faces.

And then that evening, despite the mutinous feelings within the group, we agreed again to be split into two teams with instructions to go forth into the unsuspecting village. Imposing our self-absorbed games upon the hostile locals.

With typical breezy insensitivity, we were told to find out the price of a Guinness from three local pubs, have our picture taken with the Irish flag, sing and learn a shanty and other such ill-advised nonsense. Play was abandoned when the thick-fingered, dark-eyed men in one craggy little pub, unhappy at the big city interruption on their turf, started singing IRA anthems with gusto and menace. About face and a swift return to the hotel, where Quentin quickly retired to his room, only attempting to gloss over events with a shaky smile the next day on the way to the airport.

In the past, my knee-jerk reaction would have been to reject all that team-bonding stuff as forced and synthetic and a particularly cruel and unusual waste of time.

But that was the thinking of the dispossessed, when I was a non-stakeholder. From this side of the fence, I can, for the very first time, see the point of forcing people to do completely pointless things.

The only person who doesn't have to take part is the one in charge. All I have to do is look sage, observe and try not to laugh.

The first thing I do, is give them a common enemy to unite against. It has to be Sammie. The only one who doesn't really deserve it, but also the only one in no position to argue.

After leading by example, I positively encourage the others to pick fault with him whenever the possibility occurs. Not surprisingly, they take to it like naturals.

RAVINDER CHAHAL

I give them a week or so to act out and then, as soon as I grow tired of this game, I rein them in.

All this disunity and bickering. I can't be seen to allow that to fester. We can't have a blame culture. Bullying will be severely reprimanded. This team has deep-rooted problems.

What we need here, are some bonding exercises of our own.



When I first set them loose on the grey streets of Holborn armed with a recipe for chocolate cake and no money, I fully expected them to come back empty-handed, annoyed and disheartened.

For my part, I had already mentally rehearsed a series of infuriating responses to their complaints that this was an impossible and quite unreasonable task.

Step 1 – Send them back out the first time they return having admonished them for failing to get into the spirit of the challenge.

Step 2 - Once I had pushed them far enough, I'd hit them with something mindless like:

'The important thing is that you tried. And that you tried as a team. The cake was just a symbol. A way to get you to gel.'

'If you used your initiative to tackle the problem together, then that's the real icing on my cake. That's what's really important. If you learned to work together then we have not wasted our time. And you know what they say about having your cake and not being able to eat it.'

Step 3 – And to finish, single out the slimiest, most earnest head-nodding, ass-kisser of the bunch for singular praise, in order to heighten resentment among the rest of the group.

But just as I was beginning to miss them, impatient for the chance to recite my carefully planned provocation, they return, triumphant. Laughing and joking as one.

Arms round Sammie. Offering me a thick slice of home-made chocolate cake.