

Building the Dream Team: Sweet Dreams Turning into Nightmares

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The one-on-one session was approaching the third hour and Jenny was feeling a bit weary. She was into her third month in Action Think Tank (ATT) and what she expected to be a smooth-sailing onboarding into the role of the Director of Research was far off tangent.

“It is important for you to take your role seriously as you have agreed to take on the responsibility of a director. While, you may feel the pressure to agree with the CEO, there is this personal accountability, as the director, to be fair across the board. Leadership is always about making the right decision.”

The advice from Dr Quek, a researcher at ATT struck at the core of Jenny’s conscience. This was her first role as a director and although she was initially reluctant to take on the post, the CEO and the Director of Administration, a pleasant and convincing lady, managed to make her change her decision to follow her husband to relocate to Bangkok. A week-end marriage, as it was often called, seemed to be an acceptable arrangement. Her career progress would not be thwarted. Besides, the children would continue to have access to high-quality education in a premier international private school in Kuala Lumpur.

Jenny felt very much welcomed on her first day. The team, comprising seven researchers shared the operational aspect of the department, indicating the current status of their respective projects as well as the department’s key performance indicators (KPI) for the year. It seemed manageable and Jenny felt relief.

“I have settled in quite well, honey. The team seems strong and everyone is on track. I have a feeling that my first stint as a director would be a successful one. Wish me luck, hon.”

Jenny sounded confident and on top of the world that night when she spoke to her husband, Reezal, over the phone. Though Reezal preferred his wife and children to be by his side, he knew that his wife was elated to be offered the post of a director, the highest level of authority since she started her career twenty-five years ago. The initial feelings of elation turned to gloom as the weeks unfolded. In between sobs, Jenny related her day to day experience to Reezal at the end of each day.

“Everyone in the team seems to be working in silo. They don’t seem to communicate or share their ideas among themselves. I don’t get it. How do they expect to achieve their KPIs at this pace? This would never happen at Bright Consulting.”

Jenny was beginning to miss her previous workplace, Bright Consulting. As consultants they were required to finish each project within a month. She wondered how did she get the idea that ATT would be a greener pasture. In fact, she was beginning to feel that she wanted nothing to do with the sheep grazing the pasture. They certainly were not any shepherd’s dream flock.

THE FLOCK

ATT had seven researchers in its research team when Jenny took over the helm as director, each with less than one year and the half year experience in the company. In its decade of existence ATT had witnessed its researchers come and go. The turnover rate was way above ‘normal’. Except for one researcher, who managed to stay almost five years in the company, none had stayed the three-year contract commonly given to its staff.

Of the seven, the longest serving researcher was **Palagia** an expatriate from Mexico. With 12 years of management consulting experience in a few consulting companies, Palagia had been at ATT one year and five months when Jenny arrived. To her credit, Palagia had published four reports which she took over from three other researchers who had left when she started work at ATT. Those were easy for her to complete and the CEO was very pleased with her achievements. However, Palagia found managing research projects from scratch a bit challenging. Of three projects entrusted to her, two had been scrapped when the external researchers requested to pull out of the projects. Unbeknownst to Palagia, her lack of sensitivity to the local culture had caused some discontent over her project management approach among some researchers, some of whom were quite renown researchers in top research universities in the country. Palagia was a survivor, always looking for opportunities for career advancements. What she lacked technically, she would tone down by peppering with her positive outlook of her inner motivation to survive. Jobs were hard to come by in her homeland due to tough competition in the job market. Although she had never learned to speak the local languages, she felt very much at home in cosmopolitan Kuala Lumpur.

Parimala Ranga, or Pari as she was commonly known to the team, was near retiring age and an accomplished researcher. Having spent most of her life doing applied research, Pari was very set in her ways. She was meticulous and conservative in her thinking. Pari was easily agitated and could not get on well with the other team members. In the one year and three months that she had been at ATT, she had produced two research reports which were of high quality. Jenny acknowledged her contributions but found it hard to convince her to have more decorum in her interactions with the rest of the team.

Phaik Siew was brought in for her vast experience in knowledge management. She had more than 20 years in managing organisational learning and was a staunch advocate of the concept of learning organisations. At first she was gung-ho about being a researcher at ATT, given the public perception of ATT as an established research centre. After less than six months into the job, she realised that there was a major mismatch between her skills set and the requirements of the job. The situation worsened when she was burdened with administrative tasks which took days to complete while the other researchers spent precious time on their readings and interviews. Jenny could not understand her constant lamentation over the ‘unfair’ treatment given to her; having to prepare files for meetings and write minutes, etc. Her confirmation was still pending after eight months and she was distraught. In the last four organisations that she had been working, she was a ‘talent’, moving up the corporate ladder too quickly that salary increment would stagnate, forcing her to move on to another company. In all four companies she was confirmed before time. Her frustration built up as time ticked and her confirmation was still pending. Though she tried hard to concentrate on her writings, Phaik Siew often got distracted when Jenny came for her one-on-one session to talk about her progress and personal development.

“What a waste of time! I don’t even have enough time to complete my current projects, let alone think about my personal development. This weekly one-on-one session is really getting on my nerves!” Phaik Siew thought aloud.

Dr Sophia was a no-nonsense academic who was so consumed by reliability of data. Brilliant with numbers and statistics, Dr Sophia would run her data again and again and often gained interesting insights each time she did so. This bothered Jenny as she felt that it was a waste of time. Palagia and Jenny often lamented that academics would never be able to survive in a consultant’s world where according to both of them, often times the plots would have to be written even before data collection. Though she enjoyed the technical side of work, Dr Sophia often felt dejected as her technical writing style did not match the more journalistic style preferred by ATT. To make up for her lack, Dr Sophia took a few writing classes. Another matter which stressed her out was the fact that although she had a PhD, her job designation was as a manager while Phaik Siew who only had bachelor degree was a senior manager. ATT did not change her job grade when it was converted from a temporary post to a contractual post. As someone who had quite a bit of experience in human resources operation, she felt that this was unacceptable. No amount of discussion with the director of HR or the CEO could change her circumstances. Dr Sophia decided to take a positive outlook to bear it all in order to enhance her research skills. Besides, she could always turn to her colleague, a fellow academic – Dr Quek, when her emotional roller-coaster was at its lowest.

It was strange that Dr Sophia had this idea that she could find refuge in Dr Quek, who in Jenny’s initial assessment must be suffering from some sort of bi-polar disease. Though she had been quite

productive in the short time that she had been with ATT, Dr Quek was both level-headed and eccentric at the same time. It was difficult to understand her way of thinking. She was quiet, observant, and a bit sensitive. Jenny could sense that there something troubling Dr Quek when she first joined ATT. Secretly, Jenny hoped that both Dr Sophia and Dr Quek would gradually leave the company as academics, in her opinion, had not idea about the business model of a research house. The romantic notions of research of the ivy league towers have no place in the rigorous space of research houses which mean business! Jenny confided in Jesbil, the Director of Operations:

“I am a little bit worried about the pace of work around here. To start with, I think the KPI for each researcher is nothing to shout about – it is way below what we consultants are used to. It does not make any business sense at all. I don’t understand why my team keeps on delaying the deliverables. It seems that they are unable to communicate well with each other and not cooperating with each other as well. The academics and the market researchers are on totally different wavelengths. I would much prefer to have a team of consultants on board. We are more time conscious.”

Kevin Hanks was quiet and kept to himself most of the time. A graduate from Carnegie Mellon University (he was enrolled at its branch in Adelaide), he was always at his computers. To him, data is king. He had good IT skills and was familiar with many research software packages. He was well-liked and was often referred to by the other team members. To Jenny, although Kevin was relatively ‘harmless’, as compared to the rest of the team, he was someone she had to monitor closely on hygiene matters. He often came in late and would leave the office by 5 every day, an hour before formal work hours was to end. Jenny had been ticked off by the director of administration for being careless on this matter and she hated that.

“Why should I be their time keeper,” she thought to herself.

However, as she wanted to be in the good book of the micro-managing director of administration, she made sure she sent reminders to Kevin and advised him to abide by office rules.

Professor Emeritus Zainal Ariffin was the classical absent-minded professor. The older of the only two men in the team, he got the job because of his political affiliation. Just like Kevin (whom Jenny found out later to be Professor Zainal’s best friend’s son), Professor Zainal also seldom adhered to office rules. He was always ‘out in the field’ to ‘build relational capital’. So, he claimed. Because of his large network connection, he had five outstanding, not as in ‘great’ but ‘delayed’ research projects. No one dared to ask the status of his projects as he would snap at anyone he chose and this alienated him from the rest. On many occasions, he feigned ignorance when he could not explain why his project was delayed. Jenny was careful not to tread on his path too as he had ‘strong cables’ and

had no qualms about pulling them. She had also been advised by Jesbil to understand the local culture if she wanted to do well in her job.

New Boss, New Management Style

While Jesbil could identify with Jenny's discomfort over her team working in silo, he felt that a good balance comprising talents from different research backgrounds was ideal. Jesbil had great respect for Professor Poh, the previous director who was instrumental in building the department and setting the level of quality. Almost at retirement age, while he could see some potential in Jenny, Jesbil felt that she had a long way to go in her leadership journey.

In the last decade that he had been at ATT, Jesbil had seen a few CEOs and directors come and go. Each had a different management style. Steve Lee, the first CEO he worked with was a very likeable boss who managed from the guts. However, he was sometimes inappropriate and too wishy-washy to lead effectively. So not much was done in the two years he was at ATT. The next CEO, Azrai Johan, was a pace-setter who propagated the value of being competitive. He set hard-to-achieve goals and standards which many good staff found fulfilling and inspiring. The ones who could not measure up usually left before the end of the contract. Azrai left a legacy of great policies and procedures when he moved on to start his own consultancy company five years later. Azrai's successor Pierre Kruger was the classical authoritative boss who dared to take risk and was dramatic. Though he was creative and perceptive, he was also highly suspicious of others. Jenny was recruited by Pierre who had worked on a few projects with her before and thought she would be able to transfer some consultancy skills to manage ATT's research team. Jenny was confident that she would be able to shine in her new job as she had a fair bit of experience dealing with difficult bosses. She shared her views with her ex-colleagues at Bright Consulting during her farewell lunch:

“When I worked at Spot On Consulting, my boss was beyond comprehension. He was always suspicious and wanted all work to be completed by yesterday. After a while we began to gain skills on how to manage him. The secret was to acknowledge how smart he was, how justice was so important to him and also how good he was with simplifying work processes. We literally had him around our fingers. Nonetheless, we also learned that we had to safeguard ourselves by making sure we are very specific in our communication. We usually communicated using emails a lot just to cover ourselves. I am sure I can handle Kruger. Wish me luck.”

Different Mirrors, Different Views

The canteen was a bit warm but as the morning meeting took longer than usual, Jenny and Jesbil decided to have a quick bite over there. Jesbil sipped the much-too-sweet ice lemon tea slowly as he listened to Jenny. She was obviously upset.

“They were on each other’s throats again”, said Jenny.

“Who?”, asked Jesbil.

“Parimala and Dr Sophia. They just cannot seem to be civilised with each other. Coming from different schools of thoughts, they never see eye to eye.” replied Jenny

“I am glad that I had gathered enough experience at Bright Consulting to handle both of them. We had names for staff like them. I looked them both in the eye and told them to stop being petty. Sometimes I feel like a nanny rather than a boss. I have seen so many like them that I feel a sense of déjà vu. Kruger would agree with my way of handling them, I am sure.” Jenny continued with much confidence in her voice.

Jesbil put down his glass of ice lemon tea and looked Jenny in the eye, saying:

“Jenny, I really admire your courage to take on the challenge to lead a group of highly accomplished researchers. However, having been here for quite a bit, I think it would be timely for us both to relook how we do things around here, and how we can build a better work culture.”

Jesbil could sense that if Jenny continued to adopt this attitude, she may fall into the traps of a narcissistic leader. In the last few months that she had been here, Jesbil found Jenny to be a wee bit self-entitled, putting herself on a pedestal far above her subordinates. During the management meetings, Jenny was often ruthlessly critical of her team. Jesbil found this worrying as ATT had an unusually high turnover rate. A little more empathy on her part would be most welcomed, thought Jesbil as he listened to Jenny’s barrage of complaints about her team. On the way back to the office after lunch, he gently advised her to communicate frequently and honestly with her team, and to apply a little levity whenever she could. Mild as he was, Jesbil had been able to adapt to ATT’s work culture as he had worked in a few companies. He hoped Jenny would be able to weather the ATT storm.

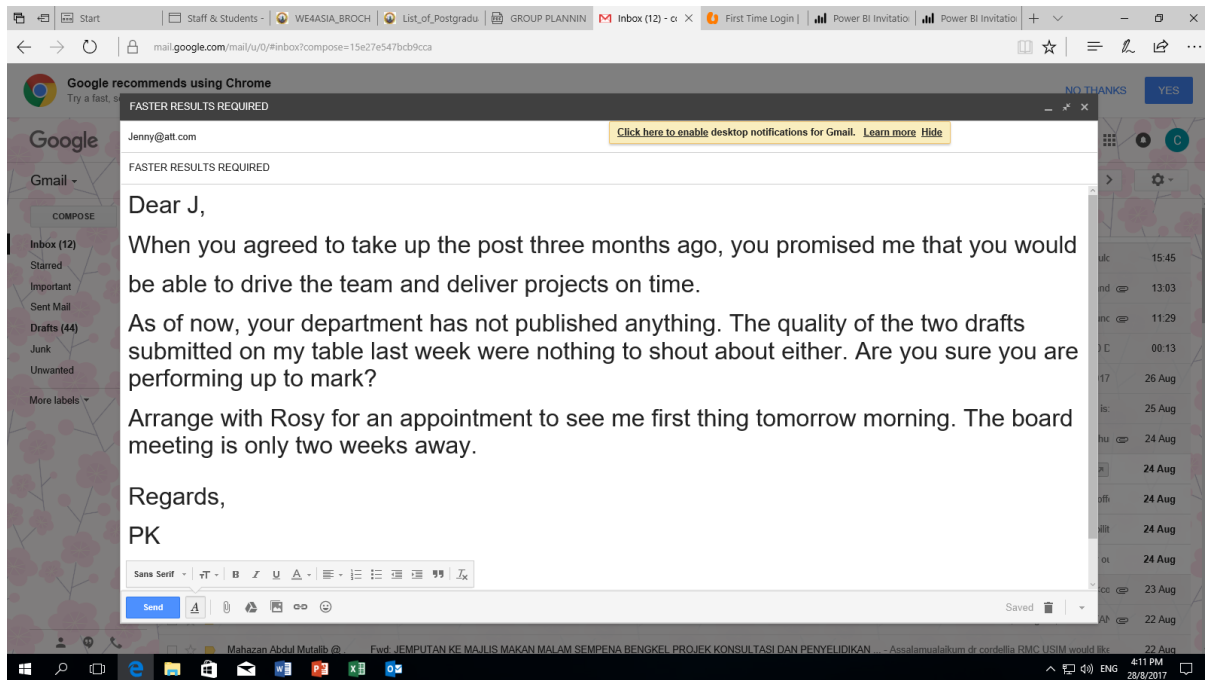
“A storm in a tea-cup really”, thought the bemused Jesbil, as he opened the door to his office.

Thinking about the boss he feared most when he worked for a telecommunication company many years ago, Jesbil entered his office.

“Nothing could be worse than having a cruel boss who was large and in-charge, a bit of a bully. Now that is frightening,” said Jesbil to himself as he sat on his chair and quietly resumed work.

The Demanding Boss

Next door, Jenny's usual quiet afternoons after lunch was interrupted by an email from Pierre Kruger.



Jenny was in shock and felt confused. She was angry and teary at the same time. Angry that so much was expected of her when in her opinion, the team she had been entrusted to lead was no big deal in the first place. If they were such good researchers, why were they not churning the outputs quickly? Back at Bright Consulting, she could produce at least one research report per month.

“All this need for data integrity was just the team’s way of prolonging a project!”
Jenny was fuming as she recalled the lame excuses each member of the team furnished each time she had the one-on-one sessions with them.

Jenny dialled her husband’s number and sobbed uncontrollably.

“Honey, are you ok.?” Reezal was concerned.

“Of course not! I am furious. This silly boss of mine wants to know why my team has not produced anything in the last three months. Now, tell me, how should I know? They are researchers and a hard bunch to manage with their excuse wielding tongues!” cried Jenny in between sobs.

Reezal tried his best to subdue his agitated wife over the phone to no avail. Jenny rattled on about her team and ATT. When she was more composed, Reezal told her he would take the night flight after work to be with her.

Double Whammy

When Reezal arrived at their posh condominium a little after midnight, Jenny was wide awake. Apparently, the earlier dilemma was nothing compared to the update she was about to share with her husband.

Two of the researchers handed in their resignations that evening! Kevin Hanks resigned citing that he could not stand Jenny's management style. He found Jenny to be annoying, lacking in research skills, overbearing – pushing the researchers to the limit. She had no technical skills and was a true blue 'LLB (Look Like Busy)' person. According to Kevin, research at ATT was very different from the approach used by the consultancy companies which was profit driven and churning reports mainly to be consumed by their immediate clients. ATT's research was shared on public domain and researchers must be meticulous in ensuring the reliability and validity of their data. Jenny was unable to differentiate the differences, according to Kevin.

Dr Sophia tendered her resignation and attached a 16-page essay on why she decided to resign. Twelve of those pages were about Jenny's lack of credibility as a leader. There were explicit examples provided to support her claims – Jenny's lack of tack in handling meetings, her lack of interest in reading the drafts thoroughly, and her obvious apple-polishing of the bosses, among others. Jenny felt slapped in the face when she read, the last line of the essay:

“A litmus test of her credibility as a leader in research and publication needs to be carried out. If she is so good, where is the proof of her work? How many research projects has she managed or completed? How many papers has she published?”

As she read Dr Sophia's essay out loud, Jenny was filled with grief. She realised that she should have taken more time to understand the team. Was she really too pushy? Was it true that she micro-managed the team? To think that she thought it was the director of administration who micro-managed! Was it true that she lacked research skills too? She had more than 25 years in the consultancy business. How could that be? Jenny was devastated as she reflected upon the accusations hurled at her. Jenny had yet to finish reading the Dr Sophia's 'essay' when she heard some noise. Reezal was already snoring. Jenny put down the letter and pulled the blanket over her head.

“How I wish this was just a nightmare,” she thought as she dozed off.