

Growing Up in a Department

by Charles Robbins

Sam, the purchasing agent went to each new product meeting with sharp pencils and with a sharper tongue. He had been practicing his taunts and comebacks on the way to work today. In his mind, he had his agenda ready and mentally organized the verbal bait he would use to lure that ego centric and infantile designer who dared to contradict his ideas within his department's domain. He thought, "Well, Bill could get away with a few wins in selecting components for the new design, but when we actually pick suppliers and parts, he will learn to bend in my direction. I run this show."

Just the other day, Bill had been in his office to show him that he could get that new memory chip he wanted so badly for one-half of the price Sam had negotiated himself. It wasn't so bad that the boy wonder had made a score, but that he let the two expeditors in the first two cubicles know that Engineering was able to negotiate a better deal. As in most companies, news travels as fast as the speed of light and by the end of the day, all the people upstairs on the research and development floor would be contacting him to get better pricing on their favorite trinket. Sam knew he had better get this under control quickly or the direction of the company would change towards Engineering and not purchasing. He was making valuable contacts over the last two years and his number was rising in the corporate world. He was going to clear Bill out the way.

Sam had met individuals like Bill before. Smart, energetic and had his hands into everything. Only with Bill, he knew practically something key about every product that Quantum Computing made. And he had a working solution for every problem from design, to testing, to production, to shipping and even in field support. "He is even writing the technical manuals and training guides," he shouted one morning in disbelief when he opened the email with the two attachments. The five workers in Sam's wing of the front office ignored the outburst since his shouts erupt like Old Faithful on a regular basis.

Like Superman, Bill has a fatal flaw, and Sam, like Lex Luther, he was going to squash Bill today in front of his peers, managers, and chief executive officer. Bill could not control his anger in an argument when his precious design of the quantum computer was jeopardized. He would sputter, he would shake and he would lose that cool confidence in the meeting and then no one will let him be in charge of building an anthill in New Mexico. All Sam had to do was place the bait in the trap and use a few tricks to get Bill to head into the gauntlet. As with a black hole, once Bill went past the event horizon, there would be no escape.

In the conference room, there are representative from every department that will contribute to the new design. Bill is getting ready to sit in the middle of the north side of the table. At the head of the table, there is the tall and thin Robert Stevens, the president of Quantum Computing. He has been in the front office since the beginning and is capable of working in every department except Engineering, where he has little interest in the magic that comes from behind the doors.

Besides Robert is Melanie Dillon, the chief financial officer, the financial wizard who knows where each dollar is spent. Then there is the Engineering version of the three Musketeers, Ralph Edwards, Paul Rajiv,

and Douglas Erin. Right or wrong, they are one for all and all for one. Nevertheless, they are good at what they do and they continue to build new products that cause their competitors to lose sleep many nights. There is Henry Peyatt, the production supervisor. Tom Henry, the shipping and receiving manager. Bob Johnson, the head electronics technician, Wesley Billings, head of worldwide marketing and sales. Finally, there is Sam, who purposely takes the chair directly across from Bill, so to ensure that the path towards the trap is clearly present.

This is not the first meeting that this group has had. They meet each week, but today Bill has to show he will meet the critical date for the prototype testing. Each department is eager to get past this phase and start to make the real money in the super computer market.

Sam has his finger holding onto the card showing that a critical chip was added to the bill of material in the last week and that the component will not be available for 10 to 12 weeks. There are indentations on the papers where Sam is fingering the document in preparation for unveiling of the kryptonite that will push his adversary, Bill over the edge.

After Bill completes his optimistic report on the stages of the prototyping process, each representative asks him specific questions and Bill is able to answer their concerns with good and mostly common sense responses.

Sam's heartbeat is gradually rising and he is anticipating the kill. When his time is upon him, he asks about the new main circuit breaker from the manufacturer in Houston. Then he queries about the communication bus from Atlanta. Oh, just so ever casually, he prompts the receiving rep, Tom Henry about the processing chip. Tom, check his laptop and says that the part is showing an arrival time of three months out. "Gotcha," thought Sam.

Robert comes to life at the end of the table. "What's that all about, Bill?"

Bill looks down at his notes. "Orders were placed three months ago by purchasing."

Sam pulls the ace card out and declares, "The part was just added last week. Bill, you are mistaken." Sam smiles as his verbal knife makes the first cut. He looks for the anger that would be growing in Bill's face when he realizes that his quantum computer is not going to be built.

Bill looks down at his notes. "We sent an email about the new part to purchasing in January and they confirmed the order in twenty four hours."

Sam looked down at his handwritten card. "Bill, you are mistaken. The part is new and was just added this week. You will not be able to build your super computer."

Bill smiled and held his papers like cards in a Wild West poker game. He said nothing. He just smiled.

First, Sam held his card tightly in his right hand. Then he raised his voice. "Bill, you must be wrong."

Bill just sat there and smiled.

Sam started to accelerate his speech, his face was reddening, and all of his practiced taunts started to spill out between his lips and he was yelling. His body half rose from the chair as he mentally tried to draw Bill in to his trap. He thought, "Why wasn't he taking the bait?"

Bill just sat there and smiled. He was holding a copy of the computer ordering form for critical components showing that the part was ordered months ago. He looked down at Robert Stevens and smiled. Robert's and Bill's eyes met and Bill knew he had matured a little more today in his profession. He could attend meetings and control his emotions. With no words spoken, Bill knew that the CEO would have bigger and more complex assignments for him to do in the future. Not one word was said between them.

Even minutes later, Sam was still yelling when Robert dismissed the meeting and asked him to stay behind. The engineers and designers were conferring in the hallway on their way back to their research and development. The rest of the staff resumed their day.

Sam sat at the conference table and knew he had made the biggest mistake in his corporate life. He let his negative emotions guide his decisions. With a little luck, he would still have his job after the one on one with the CEO.