

## Still Monday night

**T**he clock on the wall told Richard that, against all logic, it was 9.30 a.m. People ambled into place, dropping into chairs and sprawling around the conference table. Desultory

conversations began.

“Wasn’t the traffic horrendous this morning?”

“Did you see the game last night? What a drag!”

“Oh, not these terrible donuts again! Why can’t we have some of those healthy muffins from the place on the corner?”

“We tried that and nobody liked them, so we’re going back to donuts.”

“Where’s Bob?” Dave cut in. “He’s supposed to update us on the software beta testing this morning. Janice, did he confirm he would be here?”

“Well, I sent him the notice and he didn’t say he wasn’t coming.” Ten minutes later, still no Bob—Janice called him. Eyes rolling toward the ceiling, Janice reported that Bob hadn’t checked his e-mail, just got the notice now and wasn’t quite ready with his report. However, he would be there in a few minutes and would give them the “quick version”.

When Janice subtly pointed at her watch, Dave cleared his throat and began to speak.

“Well, OK, I guess we should get started. The purpose of our meeting is—ah—well you know, our usual Monday meeting. We’ll begin with our regular reports from Marketing, Finance, Engineering and Human Resources. Let’s leave the technical stuff until Bob gets here. George, why don’t you start?”

George Patterson, Director of Marketing, shuffled the small pile of papers in front of him, gazed momentarily at the ceiling, then spoke. “Well, I’ll just recap where we were last week.” He proceeded to do so at length, concluding, “You’ve all had a week to study the Marketing Plan. Any comments?”

After a few moments of blank stares, a junior team member spoke up. “I don’t think I got it, George. Do you have any extras?” After more shuffling, George handed over a half-inch-thick bound document. Since no other comments appeared

forthcoming, George resumed. For the next twenty minutes, he went over material that sounded strangely familiar—not surprisingly, as it had already been discussed the previous week. To the relief of all, he finally finished. “Well, that’s it. Nothing really new this week. I hope to have more for our next meeting.”

Dave’s cell phone rang. “Oops,” he said, “I meant to shut this off in case we were interrupted, but I’d better just take it.” During Dave’s ten-minute conversation, a lively discussion of the previous night’s baseball game took place around the table.

A loud knock on the door heralded the arrival of Bob Marsden, carrying a thick sheaf of papers. “Oh good, Bob’s here,” said Dave, quickly hanging up. “Let’s just jump to his report and find out what the techies have been up to.”

With no formal report to distribute, Bob summarized and explained and rambled for half an hour to an audience

clearly not much wiser at the end.

Watching invisibly from the sidelines, Richard looked at Annie in disbelief. He was just as baffled as everyone else!

Several people asked questions in an attempt to understand. Unfortunately, Bob seemed incapable of saying anything without using technical jargon, and often his explanations created more confusion than clarity. Nonetheless, after forty minutes, Dave thanked him profusely for his contribution and invited him to stay for the rest of the meeting if he wished. “Might as well,” replied Bob, “nothing much happening over my way today—and you folks have good donuts!”

Next came Marius Grant, Director of Finance. As he began his report, a side conversation started between Sheila Jones and Bert Saltzman. It began as a low murmur and grew in both volume and intensity as the discussion escalated into an argument. Others around the table were clearly uncomfortable,

as Marius struggled valiantly to be heard. They looked from the arguing pair to the speaker to the meeting leader, eyes rolling upwards in annoyance. Finally, with no lead from Dave, Marius himself turned to the pair and said, “Sheila, Bert, is there something I am saying on which you have a comment? If you’d like to share it with the rest of us, I’d be happy to relinquish the floor.”

Sheepishly, Bert admitted that a point from the previous technical report was still a bone of contention between them. Clarification from Bob revealed they were both wrong. The argument ended and Marius finished his report.

As the other regular reports were delivered relentlessly, time rolled on and Dave suddenly realized it was 11.45 a.m. “Well,” he said to ten sets of glazed-over eyes, “it’s almost lunchtime. We still have quite a lot to cover, so perhaps we should order in. What do you all think?” After much discussion, Janice was dispatched to place the lunch order.

“Oh, I’m sorry Dave,” interrupted Deborah Swanson, an invited guest from the Promotions Department, “but I’m afraid I must leave. I was under the impression the meeting would last only the morning and I have other commitments for the afternoon.”

Since Deborah’s input was key to the long-awaited discussion on the launch of the new subsidiary, it was agreed that this would be postponed until the next meeting and Deborah took her leave.

The meeting dragged on and on, finally ending at three-thirty, and Richard felt truly depressed.

A loud throat-clearing “ahem” made him turn—his eyes popped and his jaw dropped. Seated at the end of the table was a five-foot white rabbit wearing bright red gloves! His long ears stood straight up, and his left eyebrow cocked upwards quizzically. This was one cool bunny!

On the table in front of him stood a large, old-fashioned

cash register—the kind that used to be in little stores selling everything from soup to nuts, before the computer chip changed everything. The kind that rang up the groceries with a loud “Ca-ching!”

Richard gaped. The rabbit spoke. “Don’t look at me like that. Haven’t you ever seen a rabbit before? My name is Brucie and I’m about to tally the cost of this waste of time your people call a meeting.” His red-gloved paws flew over the keyboard and a paper strip snaked out of the machine as he rang up the items one by one.

“Ten regular participants and two visitors, total annual salary \$1,425,000. Hourly costs for those direct salaries using the standard formula, \$712.50. Multiply by the six l-o-o-o-n-g hours the meeting took. Total direct salary costs of the meeting...” Brucie’s right ear suddenly bowed forward at right angles to his face, a loud “Ca-ching!” erupted from the cash register and, ripping the tape off with a flourish, Brucie read,

“Four thousand, two hundred and seventy five dollars.

“The four Directors each spent an average of ninety minutes preparing their reports. Total hourly salary \$355 for all four, times six hours...” Down came Brucie’s right ear, “Ca-ching!” shouted the cash register. “...two thousand, one hundred and thirty dollars!

“Typing, copying and binding the reports, four administrative assistants, total hourly salary \$76, three hours.” “Ca-ching!” “Two hundred and twenty-eight dollars.”

Mesmerized by Brucie’s bowing right ear and the “Ca-ching!” of the cash register, Richard’s shocked mind took in the numbers. But Brucie wasn’t finished.

“Outside printing of the four reports (the Printing Department couldn’t get them done on time), ten copies plus three extras just in case.” “Ca-ching!” One hundred and forty-three dollars.”

“Coffee and donuts for ten people.” Down came the ear. “Ca-ching!” “That’s another fifty-five dollars—the cheapest item in the meeting and the first thing to go when cost-cutting comes up at budget time!” added Brucie with a knowing grin.

“Unbudgeted lunch costs...” “Ca-ching!” “One hundred and fifty dollars.”

Brucie ripped the tape off the cash register, both ears bowed in concert and the machine erupted again with an extra loud “Ca-ching!”. Looking at Richard with one eyebrow cocked, he announced, “This poor excuse for a business meeting cost your company a total of six thousand, nine hundred and eight-one dollars!”

With that, Brucie grinned broadly and—before Richard’s astonished eyes—both he and the cash register vanished.

Annie smiled at Richard reassuringly, took his hand, twirled her feather duster in the air and before he could think any further, they were both back at his desk. The view from the window told him it was still night, and the clock confirmed they had been away only moments. Richard shook his head in an effort to regain his sense of reality.

Annie, it seemed, had settled in and was ready for a discussion. “Well,” she said expectantly, “what’s your reaction to what you saw and heard?”

“Not good,” Richard grimaced. “If that’s an example of what goes on at meetings across the company, no wonder so many projects get bogged down.”

“What do you think went wrong?” asked Annie.

“Where would you like me to begin?” replied Richard ruefully. “First there was Dave’s opening statement. If a person can’t find a better reason to meet than just ‘our usual Monday meeting’, you have to wonder how effective the meeting will

turn out to be. And those regular reports! George didn't need to report at all. He had nothing new to say—why didn't he just say so?"

"People are often reluctant to say that though," said Annie. "They feel that people will think they are not doing their jobs."

"And that rambling dissertation of Bob's! I had no idea what he was saying. He certainly seemed enthusiastic about the testing, but I don't think anyone else understood. I looked around afterwards and the only response was relief that it was over!

"The most important item that should have been discussed was the promotional program, which they didn't get to because the meeting took so long they lost Deborah! I can't believe it." Richard shook his head angrily.

After a moment's silence, he suddenly looked up at Annie and exclaimed, "And I had never realized the size of the

price tag! \$6,981 for one meeting! These people do this every week, so that adds up to nearly three hundred and fifty-thousand dollars in a year.”

“And how many other meetings would you estimate take place throughout the company every day?”

“Well I know that whenever I try to reach anyone by phone, an awful lot of them seem to be constantly in meetings! There must be at least ten meetings of different sizes and lengths every day, just in this office alone—and that might be a conservative estimate. Then there are all the meetings held throughout the divisions—it just doesn’t bear thinking about.

“But Annie, people do need to get together—some things *need* face-to-face discussion. So we have to meet. We can’t do without meetings! ”

“Certainly not,” Annie replied. “It’s not a matter of cutting out meetings, but of making them effective business tools. This is a communication issue, Richard. The skills

involved in running a meeting—and even in taking part in other people’s meetings—are communication skills, and this is just one example of how poor communication can cost your organization a lot of money. People often pay lip service to the need for good communication, but when it comes right down to it they don’t see it as vital. More often it’s seen as a warm and fuzzy kind of “nice to have”. But what you saw tonight should prove to you that it’s much more than that. Communication has a direct effect on profitability!”

“Yes, you’re right, Annie. But what can I do about it?”

“The trouble is,” continued Annie, “that people are just expected to somehow know these things. But how can they know if nobody teaches them? Even though survey after survey tells us communication skills are vital for effective business leaders, how much time goes into teaching these skills at business schools? Did anyone teach you how to run a meeting?”

“No. Come to think of it, nobody did,” replied Richard thoughtfully. “I’ll bet there’s nothing about this in our training or professional development program. Maybe there should be.”

“You’re on the right track, Richard. Training is the key, but it needs to be the right kind of training. When you ask people to change, it’s always a good idea to tell them why. It seems to me you need to show your people how they could save the company large amounts of money by improving their meetings, and *then* give them the right training to help them do that.”

Richard was thoughtful. He could already see the potential savings from improving the whole meetings scenario throughout the company.

As if reading his mind, Annie said, “Yes, but didn’t you just agree to slash the training budget and stop all new training initiatives until further notice, in an attempt to save money?”

With that, she stood and gathered her mop and pail,

preparing to leave. “Would you like more food for thought?” she asked with a smile. Poor Richard! He really didn’t want to hear any more. But knew he needed it, so he nodded his head.

“Think about all this in the meantime, and be here tomorrow night at the same time.” And she left, closing the door softly on a bewildered Richard.