



Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:14:00

Bovine Behaviour

Senior Team Meeting

By Jac Slim

‘It’s been noted in my 360° reviews that, as a boss, I don’t give enough credit to members of my team when they achieve something noteworthy,’ Les looked round the table slowly. ‘Well I’m mending my ways right now. Anna, I would like to publicly state that I give you full credit for the right royal cock-up you achieved last week.’

It came out of the blue at the Monday morning senior meeting. There they all were, sat round the meeting room table. Les at one end, his bulk silhouetted against the white board. Miss Frobisher at the other taking notes, except at that point her pen hand had frozen in mid-air.

Anna was feeling hot then cold by turns, feeling her colleagues’ embarrassment for her and being rigid and confused - a bird suddenly finding itself between a cat’s jaws. She fought back tears, got up and walked round the table to the door: the long way past Miss Frobisher in preference to the shorter way past Les.

To keep them all guessing, Les had held back naming his target until the climax of his diatribe; a climax he seemed to enjoy as well as any other sort. He had started by discussing an underestimation

of extra web server capacity purchased for the Black Friday sale that had just taken place.

‘Did I say 10%? Hey, I’m catching the disease. Our spec was 100% short or half the amount we needed for you mathematical geniuses. So instead of getting lots of punters grabbing what they considered to be a bargain online, our phone lines were jammed with people saying they couldn’t bloody get online, and our warehouse now stands full of crap imported on the assumption it would fly off our shelves.’

Up to the point of revelation, everyone had been asking themselves if they had been the person to slip up. Might have known it would be Anna because Les seemed to get off on tormenting her.

When she finally emerged from the ladies’ toilets, there in the corridor was the stooping figure of Tony, peering at her over his half-moons.

‘Alright Anna?’

‘Oh absolutely buzzing, Tony. What do you think?’

‘Anyone could have made that mistake Anna. We were maxed out; the timescales were ridiculous. I’m surprised no one checked your calcs. I would have thought Lara and Peter would have done.’

‘Look if it’s all the same Tony. I just want to sit at my desk avoiding all the non-stares that everyone will be giving the leper in their midst.’

‘There was no need for him to mention it like that.’

‘Well it makes him feel big if he can gore someone,’ especially me, she thought.

The main office was open plan; ranks of uniform desks with uniform computer monitors - its monotony relieved by the odd floor plant or conflag table and chairs. When Anna walked back into the offices, silence moved before her down the room like the mist of a chemical gas attack, all heads suddenly finding something really important on their screens.

'Ja! Dead woman walking,' whispered Lara to her neighbour.

Home Sweet Home

Anna rented a ground floor flat in a Victorian house. When she arrived back from work, the curtains were still drawn. This meant that Matt had either left without opening them or had stayed in all day. She found that it was the latter case.

'Why didn't you go to college today?'

'You don't understand Anna. As an artist, I function on the energy of inspiration. I wasn't getting a positive vibe about college today. Besides which, this Brexit thing is disturbing my karma.'

'Oh I quite understand, the underground is almost empty these days because people can't force themselves into work because of Brexit angst. Did that also prevent you from tidying up the place while I was at work?'

Matt hadn't always been an aspirant artist. When she met him, he was studying for an MBA and holding down a job. Then the pressure of study had got too much for him and they'd agreed that he could give up his job. Anna would keep working full time and support him until he'd got the MBA – then the world of business would throw open its arms to him, laden with riches.

He'd failed his MBA and, instead of trying again, went to a local college to do business studies. Looking back, she realised that she shouldn't have been surprised when he announced that a blinding insight had revealed to him that art not business was his destiny.

'What's the problem, Anna?'

'I've just had a shitty day at work is the problem and I come back to a flat which has probably seen no action during the day bar you lifting your arse off the sofa to scratch it. Did you at least go to the shops?'

'N-n-o-o, but there'll be something in the freezer.'

'... with best before date around about the end of the Crimean War!'

Anna broke down in tears and told Matt of her lousy day.

'Tough one, Anna. Let's go down the Anchor and drown our sorrows.'

... because you're going through a lot of tough times, thought Anna.

She went out of Matt's feculent nesting site into the bedroom and smartened up. She put on high heels, looked at herself and felt a little better. When she came back, she saw that Matt's preparations had run to throwing on an old jacket over his stained T-shirt and shoving his feet into trainers. Why do I bother? she thought. These days, he hardly ever dresses up to go out with me.

The Anchor

The dark wood of the Anchor's interior was warmly lit by lamps in Victorian porcelain bowls hanging from the ceiling on chains and

from matching wall lights. A thousand reflections glinted off the racks of glasses above the bar counter and the mirrors behind it. There was a welcoming rumble of conversation punctuated by laughter. There at a corner table sat Di and Jack. Anna wondered whether the visit to the pub was a truly spontaneous reaction by Matt to her woes. Matt and Jack immediately fell to discussing the fortunes of Arsenal and trading stale arguments about whether the manager should resign.

‘But you aren’t OK are you, Anna?’ Di pressed after their initial exchange of greetings. ‘I can tell.’

‘No, if I’m honest. I don’t know what I’m most upset about: getting beaten up at work or being taken for granted at home.’ She told Di about her day.

‘He’s no right to say that. Why didn’t you go straight to HR?’

‘It’s what’s called a “small and dynamic company” Di. HR is just one person who’s an instrument of the management. Complaining at best looks like a sign of weakness and at worst it has the effect of amplifying my mistake.’ She stared into her gin as if she wished she could shrink and dive into it.

‘Making a mistake is not incompetence, Anna.’

‘I usually double check my figures but Les piled this Black Friday sale on top of everything else at the last minute.’

‘You shouldn’t have to had to do it all by yourself. Wasn’t there anybody to check?’

‘Well ... Peter’s a junior. He just takes the figures and puts them into the model. He wouldn’t have noticed if they had implied that the whole population of Peru was going to visit the site over a period of 5 minutes. I would have thought that Lara might have noticed.’

‘Look. the least you can do is to write out what happened. Then if it happens again you have a full record of what’s going on. It’s bullying, pure and simple. It isn’t like the old Anna to lie down and take this; that job has sucked the spirit out of you. Now I’m going to get you another G and T – a bloody large one.’

Anna Matadora

Anna got into the office early the following morning so that she wouldn’t have to do the walk of shame down the corridor of desks. She chose a desk in a dark corner and logged on. Tony shambled over from the tech department; she might have known that, however early she arrived – or late she left, he would be haunting the office.

‘I’ve been looking at the figures, Anna. Les was exaggerating; we’re only 10% down on the sales from last year. It seems that people were so desperate to get their hands on our “bargains” that they kept trying to log-on until they got through. Not to worry, I’ve sent a note round.’

‘Ummn, Les just loves being contradicted – especially when he’s wrong.’

‘He’s not my line manager and if the worst comes to the worst, my wife is always telling me to retire.’ He polished his specs vigorously as if to wipe away the thought of that, then shuffled off.

Anna’s wish to bury herself away was not being granted. Next thing she knew Lara was standing by her desk wearing her best concerned face.

‘Oh Anna, that was awful yesterday. Are you sure you’re ok to come in today. You can take the time off you know – I’ll cover for you.’

‘That’s alright Lara but thank you.’

‘No, I really mean it, you shouldn’t be here after you were so dreadfully treated. I’ve been saying that to everyone. I can easily take over for a couple of days.’

To Anna, this did not sound like standard Lara. She seemed desperate to take over her job. Also, if she was doing the rounds talking up the incident, it would only have the effect of prolonging group memory of her mistake.

Anna paused as if considering the offer, then said firmly, ‘Thank you but no.’ She was measurably perked up as Lara struggled to prevent her face returning to its sour default.

Anna was only allowed another 20 minutes of peace. Les could have picked up the phone to say he wanted to see her, but he made a point of stomping down the open plan office and standing above her at her desk.

‘I want a word with you,’ he said loud enough for everyone to hear.

‘OK,’ said Anna. ‘Take a seat.’

Without listening, he trotted back to his office expecting Anna to follow meekly in his tracks. She stayed put. The phone rang.

‘Why aren’t you in my office,’ Les snorted.

‘You didn’t invite me, you just walked off and you didn’t say exactly when you wanted “a word” with me.’

‘You’d better get into my office pronto.’

‘What’s it about?’

‘It’s about whether this company can stand another month of your incompetence, that’s what it’s about.’

‘It’s survived 3 years of yours. No doubt it will survive a single mistake on my part.’

Les came thundering out of his enclosure, down the corridor of desks to where Anna sat pretending to look at her emails. He’d been looking forward to an enjoyable morning watching Anna squirm as she twisted on the horns of his sarcasm. Her apparent insouciance had lanced his self-control.

‘Get out of my department now,’ he bellowed. ‘You’re never going to work for me again and no doubt when the CEO hears of your incompetence and insubordination, he will feel the same.’

Anna sat there calmly although she was shaking inside. If she spoke her voice might audibly quaver. Les on seeing no reaction lowered his head and went in again.

‘You’re just a useless waste of office space. I recognised that right from the start unlike some other idiots who gave you a chance. Bloody first in mediaeval languages from Cambridge: what the hell use is that, hey? Come on tell me. You’re in a delusional state of thinking you’re clever when you’re a total fuckwit!

Anna’s lip trembled but she looked at him directly. ‘I’m thinking large pots and small kettles, here, Les.’

Unlike Les, Anna was speaking at normal level but the office was so transfixed you could have heard a mouse fart.

This barb took Les way over the top. ‘Might have been some use if you were at all decorative but you’re not even that.’

Go on Anna, buckle, thought Lara. In her rapture at watching this corrida, she didn't notice that her neighbour was capturing Les's incontinent anger on a smartphone. Anna logged off, got up quietly and picked up her red handbag and neatly side-stepped the raging Les and walked out.

'Come back here, I haven't finished with you.' Les shouted after her.

'You just told me to get out of your department. Is this another of your perennial changes of direction? Why don't you think things through for a change?'

She didn't feel sorry for herself. Les's behaviour had confirmed her suspicions that Les was envious of her privileged education. So privileged indeed, that her parents had gone without holidays for twenty years to afford it.

Lara's neighbour ran up to her. 'I've got it all on here,' he said brandishing a USB stick as if it were a bandillera. 'Do you want to send it to HR?'

'Do what you want with it, my resignation went in first thing this morning. It's more important for the rest of you whether or not you continue to suffer him.'

Back at the Ranch

Anna felt light-headed and unburdened as she made her way home but as she turned into her road, the clouds thickened. The closer she got to their flat, the wearier her step. Matt's debilitating karma had once again prevented him from going into college. She walked into the living room to find him making a show of tidying up.

'Hi babe. I've been working up some brilliant ideas for an installation. I'm going to make it my year project. It's going to be terrific. I've realised that art isn't about going to college, it's about ... getting out there and mainlining real life. I've arranged to meet a graffiti artist called Kelly-3 in the Anchor this evening, could you spare me a few quid?'

Anna dropped her handbag and slumped into a chair and studied him. He looked puzzled.

'What's the matter, babe?'

'Us, that's what's the matter.'

'What do you mean?'

'Don't be so obtuse. We're different people to what we were when we met. We've taken different paths. I've given in my notice at work and will no longer be able to support you like some grand patroness of a budding artist and what's more I find that I really don't want to.'

'Babe, it's just a glitch we'll work through it.'

Anna laughed. 'The prospect of you doing work of any sort is bizarrely amusing. I'm finding a new job and giving notice on this flat tomorrow. Here's a tenner. Go to the pub and soak up your version of real life which in contrast to most people seems to involve being bone idle.'

'OK-ay ...well ... see you later when you've calmed down.' He threw on his jacket, pushed his feet into his trainers and went out.

No you won't, Anna smiled grimly to herself. When you come rolling home, I will have packed some essentials in a couple of suitcases and gone to stay at Di's.

No Red Meat

A few weeks later, Anna was sat with Di at a gastro pub.

‘Has Matt got in touch?’

‘Apparently he can’t live without me. I thought he’d fit straight in at Kelly-3’s squat.’

‘Maybe he’ll go back to his mother?’

‘Well she can thank me for giving her a couple of years of respite care.’

‘Steak looks tempting.’

‘I’ve given up on the red meat.’ Anna craned her neck to look at the specials board.

Back in the office, Lara was looking at the recording. This was heaven sent. Anna had resigned and this clip would surely trash Les. Two people out of the way in one incident. What did it matter if everyone thought her a cow?