

## GROWING A FACE

Because she had only had three good ideas in her whole life and two of them had failed miserably she hesitated. First, she had dropped out of school at 17 because Tony Mitchell said he could support her and their new baby on a busboy's salary. Not such a good idea. Then she had taken him back after he beat her senseless on the baby's first birthday. Again, not such a good idea. So now she wanted to change her mind. One could hardly blame her. It wasn't as if she had looks or money to back her up. It wasn't as if she had a track record of success.

Blanche looked in the mirror at her stomach. The little pooch she'd grown after Alfonso's birth poked out beneath the belt at her waist like a fat pouting lip. She sucked in a deep breath, pulled her shoulders back and thrust forth her bosom. Her tummy seemed to flatten a bit. Not a lot, but enough to make her feel better. Straightening her spine always made her tummy flatter and pushed out her "almost a B-cup" breasts a little more into the world.

"Confidence."

She said the word silently to herself. Trying to project the idea of it onto her state of mind. She looked at her face in the mirror. Her make-up looked good. Not too much. She had managed to create the impression of cheekbones on her narrow face with a stroke of blush. The lipstick was pink frosted and made her look "perky" she thought. She stared into her own eyes and tried to hypnotize herself. There was a flicker of fear and her shoulders sagged the tiniest bit. Blanche decided that she didn't notice it and walked quickly out of the ladies room.

The conference room was buzzing with Execs, mid-level managers and a few line reps, like Blanche, who were there to keep up the pretense of an "open door policy." Most of the time the reps sat away from the main table in the padded folding chairs that lined the walls. For the most part they kept their mouths shut and pretended to take notes like they really believed that the real business decisions were being made at these pow-wows.

Any one with a brain knew that all the big decisions had already been made in back rooms, on golf courses or during three-hour lunches at swanky restaurants downtown. Yet it was important to the politics of the new corporate culture that employees feel "empowered." But you can't think you're empowered if nobody is listening to you. So these biweekly staff meetings had become a sort of sounding board. All the really obvious suggestions, the ones that fit in well with whatever direction management had already decided on, were adopted readily. The suggesting employee's record was duly noted with Advantage Points, Gold Stars, smiley faces or whatever other meaningless commendation Human Resources had conceived in the name of "Employee Recognition." The rest were rejected regardless of merit and nobody really complained because after all, "at least they listen to us." "And didn't they adopt George Bolt's suggestion to post signs on the refrigerator's warning everyone to remove their Tuperware by 5:30pm on Fridays or risk it being thrown out."

Every once in a while though, some ambitious line rep or secretary came up with a truly ingenious idea and presented it with such passion and professionalism that the Execs were bowled over. When that happened it was like the top brass suddenly saw you for the first time. Blanche had nicknamed it "growing a face" because they looked at you like they were watching a human face form where there was nothing but a caul before. After that the impersonal "G'Morning" nods in the hallway became "Good Morning, Paulette!" or "Jim, How was your weekend!" The other reps picked up on it and it became part of the company lingo.

“Man, Jimmy Mullet got it made, ever since he grew a face.”

“Paulette, revamped the payroll system, saved ‘em fifty grand a year and grew a face ova’ night!”

You had to admire the people “with faces” even though you envied and dogged them whenever you could. They seemed to gain a whole new swagger in their walk and they held their heads a little higher. They even seemed to talk different. Most line reps talked with a question in their voices even when they were telling you something that you knew nothing about. It was like they were seeking permission for each word. People with faces didn’t have to do that anymore. They had been validated. They had ideas that the top dogs listened to.

Of course, it didn’t last. After a few months or so your face could fade away if you weren’t careful. You’re only as good as your last good idea. You had to keep coming up with more good ideas. And your new ideas had to be just as good or better than the last if you wanted to keep your face.

After three years on the job Blanche realized that there was another way to keep your face if you were smart. She saw that the folks who kept their faces the longest were the ones whose ideas gave them “face time.” If you put yourself in a position where they had to see you and interact with you on a regular basis you could grow a face permanently. The key was to become a part of their lives.

That’s what made Blanche’s idea such a beauty. If she played her cards right she would grow a face and secure herself weekly face time with Don LaBoue the VP of Marketing in the regular Monday Morning Marketing Meeting or the “Four-M” for short. Best of all Don would be beholden to her because her idea was going to save his ass.

Three months before Don LaBoue had come up with the not so bright idea of getting rid of the 16 lower level Line Managers that stood between the reps and the four mid-level Service Managers. The Line Managers had been responsible for handling escalated customer complaints, line rep quality reviews and tracking overall performance for each of the 16 teams of six reps. They also conducted random quality callbacks just to make sure that the customers were really satisfied with the resolution to their problem. Getting rid of them meant that quality reviews would be done less often and the Service Managers would take on additional responsibilities. The quality callbacks were dumped altogether. The Service Managers balked privately but openly they played eager team players. The move was supposed to save the company over a half million dollars annually and make the books look really pretty to investors.

Unfortunately, the plan backfired. PLUS 1 Consultants, Inc. was an outsourcing customer service agency. It had a contractual obligation to its clients to maintain an 80% or better quality rating. If not then they got paid less. If the rating dropped below 70% they didn’t get paid at all. If it dropped below 60% they’d be shelling out a rebate at the rate of \$1000 per day for each point drop under 60. It was an ambitious business plan but it had won them five multi-million dollar accounts in the first six months of operation. A little over three years later they were number two in the industry closing fast on the top spot

In the 90 days since the layoffs, however, Plus 1’s three top accounts had all dropped below 80% and one of them was hovering dangerously at 64%. The Service Managers blamed it all on the Line Reps. Without the extra performance reviews the reps were slacking off, they insisted. But the independent quality reports said different. Not only were the customers seldom able to obtain a Service Manager when they requested one, but the importance of the Quality Callbacks had

been sorely underrated. Don LaBoue was given an edict to turn things around ASAP or start looking for a new job. He tried hiring back the Line Managers but nearly all of them had found new positions and those that hadn't were still bitter.

He still walked around with that cocky grin on his face but anxiety drew deep lines in his 32 year-old brow that had formerly been so smooth and trouble free. Now a 20 year-old high-school dropout and mother of one was going to save his Yale educated butt.

Blanche sat in the corner on a padded chair near the window. She had to stifle a grin as she imagined his expression when she started to grow a face in front of his eyes. She couldn't wait. She took a sip of water from the paper cup beside her on the windowsill. Her hands were shaking. The meeting was only twenty minutes in and she felt like she was near to shaking herself silly with nerves.

She looked around her at the other reps and secretaries lining the wall. She was going to grow a face for a lot of them too, she thought. They had no idea. No one did but Blanche and Harry Fong. Harry Fong was the Service Manager she reported to now that Will Fulberg was gone. Fong was beautiful. Half Chinese and half Austrian. He stood a towering 6 foot 4 inches tall with dark brown hair, dark eyes and a fashion model's sculpted features. He radiated energy and warmth. Every woman in the office was in love with him regardless of marital status. Even the men admired him.

The only person Blanche had heard ever say a bad thing about him was Will Fulberg. It was only once and it was under his breath but Will Fulberg said, "if you got a good hand, keep it close to your vest when Fong's in the room." Blanche chalked it up to envy. Besides Will Fulberg had rarely said a nice thing about anybody. She told Fong her idea not because she trusted him but because she didn't trust herself. Maybe they would think her idea was stupid. Maybe she was missing some vital part of the "big picture" that would make her look like an idiot for suggesting it. So she ran it by him.

"Why not take the five of us reps with the highest quality ratings and make us like 'Level Two Reps.' We could be responsible for handling escalated complaints, making quality callbacks and even do anonymous quality reviews on the other reps. We could still take calls when the lines were heavy and help the Service Managers with the reports. A five percent pay bump would be a great motivation and it could be a kind of management training ground. To keep the Level Two rating we'd have to maintain our quality scores but it would be worth it. I could compile the reports and weekly and present them at the 4-M." The words came out in a rush as she explained how the company would still be saving almost a half million a year and service could return to its normal level. Fong praised her idea. He told her she should bring it up at the next bi-weekly and he would endorse it.

Blanche was thrilled. She had spent the next four days outlining her plan and detailing how it would work. She wanted to have notes on hand in case she got so nervous that she forgot what to say. She even added in a few cost/revenue numbers for good measure. Execs ate that stuff up.

That morning she had dropped a copy of her notes on Fong's desk. He wasn't there so she had scribbled a note on a post-it: "My Notes on the Level Two Rep Plan. I'm a little nervous so let me know what you think. Blanche Mitchell." She sat in her chair by the window biting her lip. The meeting was now open to new business from the Marketing Department.

Robert “Bobby” Larks the President and CEO of Plus 1 directed a hard smile at Don LaBoue. He clearly expected some answers but didn’t want to put him on the spot in front of everyone. Bobby Larks was a pal. He was always nice, always smiling. He insisted on everyone calling him Bobby. No “Mr. Larks,” and if you called him “sir” he was likely to burst into laughter and correct you.

“Nope! Nope! I refuse to acknowledge that I’m old enough to be called ‘sir.’ Just call me ‘Bobby.’ Hell, I’d prefer ‘hey you,’ to ‘sir.’”

The Line Reps had never seen Bobby lose his temper. Nobody had, except the other executives. And even then it was always behind closed doors so you could only imagine how his serene boyish face was contorting. Eight days ago anyone passing by Bobby’s office would have heard Bobby’s raised voice and then seen Don LaBoue skulking out with his tail between his legs.

Right now Bobby was saying, “Any suggestions from the Marketing Department on how we can boost our numbers?” The question was for the group but he was looking at Don. Barring a miracle Don was going to have to serve up another chunk of his ass if he didn’t come up with a solution.

“Here comes your miracle,” Blanche said to herself as she took a deep breath and started to stand.

“Actually, I would like to propose something in that regard.”

Blanche heard the strong masculine voice coming from Harry Fong. She quickly took her seat again trying to pretend as if she were only shifting. She looked at Harry but he didn’t make eye contact.

“Well, I’d love to hear anything you’ve got,” Bobby said.

“I’ve been looking at our rep evaluations and we have about five or six Line Reps who are continually rated outstanding. These folks show some real promise. I propose that we give them a little more responsibility. Let them own the process as it were.”

“How?”

“Let’s say we create a new rep position, a Second Level Rep. With authority to handle the escalated complaints and even do some blind evaluations on the other reps to supplement the ones the Service Managers do.”

Blanche stared dumbfounded at Harry Fong. He didn’t look at her. He just kept looking at Bobby and Don as he outlined the idea, her idea, in all its glory. A few scattered Line Reps in the room nodded approvingly. Clearly they liked the idea of a few of their own getting a little power.

What was he doing? Was he going to give her credit for it when he was done? Even as she thought it Blanche knew it wasn’t going to happen. But maybe he would at least suggest her as the Level Two Rep liaison to the Service Managers. Maybe. But he didn’t. Instead he suggested that the Level Two Reps report to him.

“That way,” he said, “there won’t be any surprises when the independent reviews come in. The Service Managers will already be on top of it.” The Service Managers and Don all bobbed their heads in admiration of the plan.

“Would there be any compensation for the extra duties?” a meek Line Rep piped up from the back of the room.

“Well, no. Not initially. Until we were sure the plan worked it would be better to just think of it as a short-term management training program. If things work out and we adopt the plan permanently then maybe say a two or three percent hike might be possible. But we’d have to get our numbers back up,” said Fong. “After all, we’re all in this thing together.” He added Bobby’s favorite team building catchphrase.

Bobby looked thoughtfully around the room. Don looked hopeful. Everyone stared at Bobby. Bobby Larks was a “gut instinct” guy. If he opened it up immediately for comments then that meant he liked the idea. If he started asking a lot of questions then that meant he wasn’t sure.

“Well, I’d like to look at your numbers, but otherwise I want to hear what everyone else thinks.”

“Here’s what I have now. I can get into more specifics with you later,” Fong handed across what was clearly a copy of Blanche’s notes.

The floor was opened and the praise flowed like a river over Blanche’s plan. Harry Fong soaked it up. Only once did he make eye contact with Blanche. Her cold angry stare made him flinch just a little, but he just nodded at her and smiled like she was supposed to be thrilled that he had robbed her of her chance to shine.

For the rest of the meeting Blanche just sat there growing colder and colder in the strong afternoon sun that beamed through the window. Her eyes carved into Fong looking past his pretty face. Her anger flowed over her in waves. No one would ever believe now, that it had been her idea. She had practically saved the company but no one would care. She just kept looking at Fong’s face. Staring at that beautiful mouth that she fantasized about kissing more than once. That sweet lying mouth that she was now beginning to hate.

After the meeting Blanche followed Fong out. He was walking with Don and Bobby discussing Her Plan and making a date for lunch the next day to discuss it and other business. Clearly Harry Fong’s face had grown a little more defined in that meeting. A few Line Reps came up and told him how excited they were about his plan; kissing his pretty boy ass to be among the ones selected for the new assignment.

Blanche followed a few paces behind all the way to his office. As he walked through the door Blanche called to him.

“Mr. Fong!”

“Yes,” he turned at her voice and feigned surprise as if he hadn’t known she was following him.

“Why did you do that?”

“What do you mean? It’s what you wanted right?”

“What I wanted? What I wanted was to get credit for my own idea. How could you steal it?”

“Whoa! Hold on there, Blanche. You asked me to help you.”

“I didn’t ask you...”

“You left me your outline this morning. You left that note saying you were too nervous to propose it yourself. I thought you wanted me to.”

“That’s not what the note said and you know it,” Blanche was trying not to shout, but she was so nervous and shaky that the words almost sounded like a sob.

“Calm down, Blanche. You are going to be on the Second Level Team. I promise you that.”

“But it was MY idea! I was supposed to be the liaison...I was supposed to be the person who gave the reports.”

“Is that what this is about? This is some kind of ego trip for you?” Fong chided her. Blanche flinched, momentarily embarrassed by his indignation. “This is a company, Blanche. But it’s also a team. All the players are important. It’s not just about you. You’d do best to remember that. If you want to be on the Second Level Team you’re going to have to stop thinking about yourself.”

“But it was my idea,” she said again softly, realizing that he was ready, willing and able to cut her out of it completely.

“Blanche, at least this way it has more credibility. Coming from me it has more weight. Coming from you it would have been picked apart. The other reps would have resented you for it. And besides, the boys would have never gone for that five percent hike. Be grateful that you helped come up with something that will turn this company around.

“I didn’t ‘help’ come up with it. I did come up with it...” she protested gritting her teeth.

Fong sighed in exasperation, “Blanche, this is business. You need to grow a thicker skin.”

Blanche didn’t know how it happened. She just felt the agony of it welling up inside her. The betrayal of being robbed of something as personal and intimate as a thought weighed heavily on her. Then to be chastised for being angry about it was insult to the injury. Had it been the other way around Fong would not have stood for it. “But I just take it,” she thought in disgust, “I just lie down and take it.” In her mind she was walking away. She was going back to her desk and logging on to take calls. A faceless voice to every single caller.

In her mind it was just that way. So she didn’t know how it happened, as she stood in front of Harry Fong just outside his office, that her hand flew into the air and came down hard across his face. She didn’t know who the woman was who turned and screamed to all the shocked faces. Don LaBoue, Bobby Larks, the Service Mangers, the secretaries, the reps...

“IT WAS MY FUCKING IDEA!!!!”

What she did know as she walked through the crowd back to her desk, was that in the end she had grown a face.

THE END.