

**COST
EFFECTIVE**

re.occurrence

(leo mara)

I: The lucky volunteers who, rather, were volunteered by their profiting organisations.

Robert stopped, just as he neared the opening automatic doors. He gestured with a kind expression, offering another passenger disembark first, ahead of him. She showed a kind gesture in return and stepped down the two steep steps and off the coach.

Without a similar show of appreciation, another passenger went ahead of Robert. Then another. Then another. Then another. Then another. Then another.

The automatic doors shut. The bald-headed driver picked his nose as the graffiti-wrapped coach accelerated and left the sixteen passengers standing in sunshine and rain. ‘Boobs’, ‘suck’, ‘arse’, ‘disease’, ‘vaggina’ and ‘Liams mum’ became harder to make out as it escaped the private carpark spotted with semi-expensive cars.

Robert bumped his elbow more than twice on the repurposed shower cubicle’s fogged plastic divider as he stripped out of his own clothes and changed into the striped sickly pale navy and expired cream collared shirt and trousers. He raced the shuffling sounds of the others changing in their cubicles.

The same-coloured shuttle to the building was a one-minute-long journey.

In that brief time, there were clues that some stomachs onboard were more nervous. Robert smelt two or three farts. Attention on the third cut short by an alongside cyclist attired in the stripes and a sliding-off helmet.

“Put your hand up when I call your name and organisation.”

The first Company worker stood, nonchalant, ahead of the new group. He held a clipboard in both hands. Literally... a separate clipboard in each hand as he spoke into a microphone held up to his neck with a leaning stand.

“If you cannot hear me, or for any reason *cannot* raise your hand or do not have hands, please now *raise* your hands. Now. Raise your hands now,” his voice descended, “If any one of those are a problem.”

No single person in the group moved.

“No hands. Fantastic.” The first Company worker shouted, “Molly. Sate- Sat- Satan Technologies. *Satahn Technologies*.”

A woman near to Robert raised her left arm.

“Molly, you’re assigned to Supervisor Stone. If you look to the four Supervisors to my right, Supervisor Stone had his hand raised. Please don’t be alarmed, though his hand is raised, he is not Molly, sent from Satahn Computers also. Please stand behind Supervisor Stone.”

Molly walked to Supervisor Stone.

“Mustafa. The Yellow Bank.”

“Faye. The Yellow Bank.”

“Greg. FLS.”

“Wesley. Quiet Productions.”

“Robert. WTT.”

Sat down at the computer, Robert rested fingers on thighs and watched the screen as his supervisor, Supervisor Grant, hung over his shoulder and tried to log on. It first required a password. The clue for which, was 'The name of your own daughter'. Supervisor Grant still had to think for a moment to recall the answer. He then typed 'Millie'... in all caps, with no spaces. Followed by the number nine written numerically. Finished with an exclamation mark.

Next, he needed to enter the number four, written numerically, to correctly answer the question 'How many traffic crossings are displayed in the images below?'

And after that, he used a second device to receive a code, entered the received code on the second device which generated an eight-digit code that needed entering on the computer. The eight-digit code did not work the first time. Nor the second time. Nor the third time.

The eight-digit code changed. The fourth time it worked.

"When you have watched the three videos, Robert, there'll be a series of questions to test your knowledge on Company and the process of Reduction. You have one attempt at the test. If you fail, nothing will happen. There are sixteen questions. You need zero correct questions to pass. Knock on the door once you've completed the test and I'll let you out."

II: Robert buttoned the collar on his striped shirt for his first performance review with Supervisor Grant

Robert put a hand on Supervisor Grant's shoulder in the private room. The creases in Supervisor Grant's shirt reshaped. Thin shadows in the ripples moved as though there were a tide to the fabric.

"It's okay," Robert said to his supervisor.

"You then took your hand away?" Supervisor Grant wanted to reconfirm.

"I did. Yeah," Robert reconfirmed, while not yet taking his hand off his supervisor. "But he stayed leaning forward. His head was still in his hands. He was still crying."

Supervisor Grant backed up. He took his shoulder out of Robert's feel, glanced at the possibility of an imprint. A visible stain of emotion. "Do you regularly make physical contact with the teachers paired with you?"

Robert knew no, it wasn't often. Regardless, whether it was to comfort the teacher or Robert. "No, I wouldn't say I do it very often. It felt instinctual on this occasion."

"Do WTT teach you to touch teachers?"

"No."

"Do you touch the teachers because you think they *should* teach it?"

"I think there's a time and a place to touch the teachers. And it's just when it feels like the right response."

III: Supervisor Grant suggested BCs (Brain Changes) for Rober's first Reduction

"I have asked Robert from Wide Teachers Therapy Services, that for the moment, he make no further physical contact with his customers. *Clients*. With his clients. In his third session here, he touched one. I've encouraged he not to do so again, but ask you, Manager, to approve for this to be a BC in his first Reduction?" Supervisor Grant looked across the table and bowl of bananas to his holy line-manager. "Thoughts?"

"Let me ask first, you say he touched one of his clients, should I be more concerned? Do you mean he touched them inappropriately?"

“Would hand on shoulder be considered inappropriate?”

“I’m unsure, Supervisor. Is a shoulder sexual?” Supervisor Grant’s line manager paused. “I’d like you to show me.”

Supervisor Grant moved up in his seat in the private room. He rolled up his sleeve slightly. He reached forward towards his line manager and when he couldn’t reach, he stood up out of his seat and reached a little further over the bananas. Still, he couldn’t reach, so his line manager rose from his lumber-supporting desk chair and leaned enough forward for the two to finally connect hand to shoulder.

They waited there.

“I’ll need to ask the Company,” his line manager said. He then continued with his response without moving from where he was, “But, yes. Make it a BC.”

IV: Bright tape was laid after one TBR tripped on another TBR’s Reduction pack cable rendering that TBR in their packaging unreducible, and the TBR who fell disfavoured.

Robert stepped over the neighbouring packaging’s cable which was prominently unstuck from the three scrappy lengths of blue tape intended to hold it down.

A Company worker grabbed Robert’s packaging by its bottom end which grazed the lino floor underneath it and held it up to his waist. He peeled apart the zip-lock seam where the zip was missing and therefore, the packaging was essentially broken.

“Move over here,” he ordered Robert.

Robert moved over there. Below the top of the six-or-so foot packaging where it connected to plastic scaffolding, pipes and electrical cables.

“Squat.”

Robert squatted.

Once inside the transparent bag, Robert looked about the other four or five other packs.

Two had TBRs inside. A sheet of paper stuck to both of their packs. Both stuck with a short strip the same blue tape, detailing the names and organisations of the TBRs inside and the BCs included in their Reductions.

“What does the packaging do?” Robert asked, curious, motivated to learn.

“It packaging does.”

“What?”

“Once the Reduction commences, do not regain consciousness until it is completed.”

V: Rober attended his second review with Supervisor Grant following six more sessions with teachers following his first Reduction.

“Did it? Does it make sense to you?” Rober checked. His fantastic grin was preparing to die.

“Yes. It did in that I understood it. However, I don’t agree what you said was anything to laugh at. Only the Company should choose when to refer to any part of itself in a transparent or light-hearted fashion. Not its TBRs or TBFRs. Not you, Rober.”

Smile dead. “I’m sorry.”

“So, let’s imagine that it’s possible I can be wrong.” Supervisor Grant paused. He turned down to his notepad and continued with his pen sketch of a man with a gun literally through his face and out the back of his head. “How do know she found what you said amusing?”

“She laughed,” Rober answered.

“How did they laugh?”

“How? I don’t- know, I- I don’t know how to describe it. She laughed out of her mouth? It wasn’t loud. She moved in her seat when she laughed. She went... ha. Ha-ha.”

“That doesn’t sound like an actual laugh. Which suggests that actually they too, would more likely agree with the Company and I that it was not funny what you said.”

“No. She didn’t laugh like that, like I just did, she was actually laughing. Like this, like- she covered her mouth.”

“The joke was inappropriate. They covered their mouth because they felt discomfort in the moment and were intimidated by your unprofessional demeanour. The Company would think that you misinterpreted the reaction.”

“I don’t think so. Based on everything that I’ve learnt over six years in this same job, I-“

“You made light of her experience.”

“No-”

“...At the reason for why she was referred to your organisation.”

“Not at all. No. No, I don’t think so. No. I listened to her. I showed compassion. I made the joke when it fit. I understood the risk that I took, to try to support her with humour. It worked. She asked when our next session was. Did you see that?”

VI: Supervisor Grant was late to the next meeting with his line manager, having got the dates wrong.

“...the last BC I submit for approval. Though they appear well-timed and to the profit of the client’s forward-slash teacher’s happiness and wellbeing, Rober has a tendency to use honest jokes. These jokes told to the teachers attending sessions with Rober consume time and therefore, are not cost effective.” Supervisor Grant looked up from his notepad and to his line manager. Across the bowl of bananas. “Should we take away his ability to make jokes?”

VII: Robe is irritated by an ulcer in his third performance review. The type of ulcer Robe has is a physical side-effect to undergoing the Reduction process. These ulcers are also known as ‘Symptom Through Experimental Subtraction and Shrinkage’ or

“I understand your pain,” Robe said, “is what I said. I said, I understand your pain... like... I understood her pain. If that makes sense?”

“I’m not sure it makes any sense,” Supervisor Grant replied.

“I don’t understand her pain. Do I? I can’t understand her pain, I don’t have a brother. And that brother I don’t have didn’t have a heart attack among a crowd and die at a flight show where my daughter, who also I don’t have, was there to see it all happen. Happen so fast. So fast, she said,” Robe’s eyes ascended to his supervisor’s unphased expression. “So...”

Supervisor Grant offered no response.

“Do I? Have any brothers or sisters?”

“I don’t have that information.”

“So, I could? Do you think if I did, he might’ve died too, at a flight show-?”

“I’ve been told almost nothing about who you are. Reducing you to make you the most efficient version of an employee in your role providing personal, mental health support for teachers has nothing to do with knowing circumstances.” Supervisor Grant scratched his head. “I don’t know

why you don't know whether you have family. I hope that didn't get reduced. Don't- don't mention that again."

Robe nodded, "Mention what?"

"Exactly-

"That I don't know whether I have any family?"

"Fuck." A man laid in a hospital bed in Supervisor Grant's notepad. Bandages were wrapped around his entire jaw. "Returning to what you brought up... when clients disclose hardships such as heart attacks... the Company, until it is no longer optional for you, would ask that you try less to imagine how it would affect you. Could you be less empathetic with the people you're there to support?"

VIII: no longer had any paid leave left for the remainder of the financial year at WTT after his tenth Reduction because the Company wrote days in Reductions as paid leave. Supervisor Grant forgot to communicate this during 's next performance review.

"What was the issue?" Supervisor Grant wanted to know.

"I'd rather not have to admit it." acutely cowered. He moved one arm to his own lap. "I felt that I failed."

"How did you fail? And more importantly, will it affect the Company?"

"I hope not."

"Did you read from the document provided to you? As you were strongly encouraged."

"I did," sat up straight. "I did. I followed the- the chart on the document."

"The flow chart."

"The flow chart. And I used the responses it said to use. All three of them. Was the document double-sided?"

"No. The document was no double-sided. The Company glanced over a minute or two at one of your hour-long sessions and felt that was enough to know and decide three responses were effective in responding to all your clients. They felt another page would've only made matters... unnecessarily convoluted. If they seemed unsatisfied, I wonder... did you use all three responses? Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. But, like you said, the sessions are one hour long. She expected more than three responses."

"They did?"

"Yes."

"Did you not repeat the responses? The three provided on the document."

"Can I do that?"

"Well... I think it's better to repeat the work the Companies made, even if it feels unnatural and like the completely wrong time to, rather to than instead try to use your own substantial knowledge and experience to resolve the issue."

"Repeat the same responses? Word for word?"

"Yes. Unless the Company approves of any more words. Your clients might not repeat their selves that same way, their unfortunately less reduced than you. But really, , when you pay less attention to the client and to what specifically they've gone through, you'll see... they all expect one of only three responses. And you now have those three responses ready to use." Supervisor Grant climbed a ladder of verbal enthusiasm. "The Companies saved you a lot of the work that was motivating. Try again, repeating the responses. If they fail, it's likely something you're not getting right. Wouldn't that make the most sense?"

IX: With his eleventh Reduction, broke the record. To Be Further Reduced (TBFR) with the most Reductions.

“Who came up with this system?” a worker in the Packaging room asked out loud, squinting at the sheets of paper on the outside of the packs, hoping to be able to still differentiate the TBFRs.

“I told you, tell someone in management,” his coworker encouraged, as he readied blue tape.

“You agree? You agree it’s fucking idiotic, right? I’ll say again in case there’s anyone who might not be aware of what I’m referring to even though there’s no one else in the room with the two of us. The names of the TBFRs. That we keep track of the number of Reductions they’ve undergone by taking a letter away from their names for each round in a pack. Now they’re all named for shit’s sake.”

“You can’t tell and apart?”

“It makes more work for us, , I don’t get why you’re not as upset.”

“I told you, , tell them how you feel.”

“What’s the point. I’ve never said anything to them before, but they’ve never listened to what I’ve said before.”

X: As well as through BCs, Supervisors assess TBR and TBFRs performances and will press changes upon their contributing organisations services also.

“...in protest of the new regulations.” said, rolling his tongue around his gums and the sore white swells. “They were intentionally reluctant to speak.”

“In protest of new regulation, they were not going to speak?” Supervisor Grant replied.

“They spoke. They were however, less encouraged to start speaking in our most recent session. Usually they are-”

Supervisor Grant interrupted, “Which new regulation?”

“The seventy-five percent reduction to the length of sessions.”

“Time saved for both staff and customer. Sessions should be shorter. My line-manager believed it was such a cost-effective suggestion, that he has taken it and communicated to the Company that it was his own. So, the Company will be pressing upon WTT to shorten their sessions with customers to fifteen-minutes. How human and emotional to waste the limited time that is granted ‘in protest’ of time being reduced.” Supervisor Grant cleared his throat. “Let’s move on. These performance reviews are not as long as they once were and its difficult to still discuss all points effectively. How did you do otherwise?”

“The customer spoke. When they were speaking, I recognised the familiar trust. The regular need to use me as output and reassurance. Because they still say their partner is closed off. But the reluctance wasn’t completely over. They seemed frustrated for the duration.”

“That’s unfortunate. Not sure what to do, if what they want is more time in sessions.”

“They said the cut to how long we had to talk was another disappointment. Another reason not to trust anyone who acts like they are supportive of them.”

“Why would they want more time in sessions? Do they realise they are paying the same but for less time? We’re giving them that time for free. They could be doing anything instead.”

“I think they thought the sessions were helpful.”

“If they continue to hold a grudge, then you know what you’re supposed to do.”

“I continue to be understanding and supportive?”

“No. You refer them to Complaints. And communicate that Complaints have one calendar year to reply.”

“Yes. Of course.” agreed. “And. I should add...”

“Go on. Be quick.”

“The customer opened up about their parents. How the customer was when they were a child. They reflected on moments. Unfortunately, I became disorganised. I lost focus, and instead of communicating my confusion to the customer, I pretended I still followed. I’m uncertain... but my impression was that the customer recognised that I was pretending when I confused a statement about his father for that of a whistler salesperson. From another customer’s anecdote.”

“Did the customer expressed further frustration with you?”

“I think out of similar discomfort to mine, they chose too, to not address the issue. Which, this time, was obvious miscommunication.”

“Why could you no longer follow what they were saying to you?” Supervisor Grant inquired.

“I turned my attention to the teleprompter. I’m so sorry, I- I’m sorry- not to- to criticise, it’s a small screen and because of where it is, on the arm of my seat, I, idiotically, I’m so stupid, I incidentally covered it where I rested my elbow to try to look natural and then when I focused on trying to read the generated responses, I stopped listening to the customer.”

XI: was close, Supervisor Gra believed. Still, he had further suggestions.

“We might be wrapped on BCs for from WTT. It’s wonderfully no longer inspiring. He’s been reduced to the most unoriginal, unproblematic and subservient version of himself. Indistinguishable from the rest of the Reduction Completes.”

“That’s what we expect,” the line-manager answered. “How many Reductions has he undergone?”

“I- I am now uncertain. I will find out for you.”

“Please. I want to be sure we charge WTT no less than what’s intentionally poorly written.” The line-manager moved a banana. “Do you have any further submissions for Reductions? If so, please... say fast... these meetings are now decided to be much shorter.”

“A further change is to be made to the prompter which displays the suggested verbal responses to ‘s customers. The prompter is currently located,” Supervisor Gra gestured, “...on the arm of ‘s seat. Which caused disconnect between and the customer. Never mind the emotional disconnect, said in his performance review the prompter was blocked by his arm. We can’t dare risk that he use his own initiative to think of a response to offer the customer. Therefore, I suggest that we move the prompter...” Supervisor Gra moved his hand and pointed across a way, his fingers looking involved in a game of rock, paper, scissors, mediation. “...to behind the customer. Over their shoulder. would not then need even to move his head to read the responses and have even less work.”

“Sure. Submission approved. I’d say well done, Supervisor, but you understand praise was reduced for its inefficiency. Instead, I will say... the work you’ve done is above average, but you will see no acknowledgement for it.” The line-manager sipped on literal black and white coffee. “Have you read? Ninety-eight percent customer’s in their feedback strongly agreed and emphasised that a person is extremely valuable in these sessions. But I think, what they’re really trying to tell us is, do we need a personal at all?”

XII: The tape was not secured properly despite repeated actioned attempts. There was a further incident involving a TBFR and cable connected to their packaging.

As he looked too long at Ra from Getup Dance Group in her packaging, Supervisor Gra stumbled. The shiny point of his shoe slipped under uprooted cable between two taped points. He fell forward with vigour. The cable ripped up with his foot and away from the tape and disconnected from the packaging it was plugged into.

In his packaging, started to twitch and the plastic made acute noises.

A small crew of workers scuttered about the ten packages in the space.

“What the funk?” one sort of exclaimed, dashing to plug the cable back into ‘s packaging.

“Supervisor Gra, there was a sign! There was a sign!” This worker stared at Supervisor Gra, “You funked up.”

“My mother-funking targets, oh no! What do we do? Can we just plug it back in”

“I think it’s- we need company to tell us what to do. That’s another TBFR’s done. This is the third time this exact thing’s happened. How many times do we have to change almost nothing to stop this happening?”

“WTT will pay the damage.”

“If it’s Company’s mistake, wouldn’t we cover the damage?”

With daggers, the one worker fixated on the other. His frustration looked barely restrained. “Are you suggesting that we would cover the cost of our own damages?”

The worker was slow to answer, “Yes?”

The stare went on longer. “You were accused of something.”

“What?”

“You were accused of something. Something not good.”

“What are you talking about? What accusation?”

“I haven’t thought of it yet- I mean, I haven’t recalled yet.”

“You’re making this up.”

“No. No fucking way, no, nope. It doesn’t matter. I can’t tell you. It’s confidential. It’s confidential. I didn’t say a word. But you watch out.”

“What the fuck is going on?”

“Woah!”

“Hey!”

“Funk me.”

“Supervisor Gra, that is not Company language. Alright, let’s half clean this up. Pull from WTT from his package, see if he’s done like the last two. Be careful while you’re doing it. Don’t come up with any original thoughts or ideas that’d work better and wait for Company to tell you exactly what you want to do after you’ve checked.”

XIII: Supervisor Gra had some original thoughts during his own performance review with his line-manager, Supervisor .

“Supervisor Gra, what the funk?” Supervisor started, seated behind his bananas. “Take your seat.”

“Can I stand?” Supervisor Gra asked, the automatic door to the office closing behind him.

“Can you stand?” his line-manager repeated. “I’d... I’m not aware... you usually sit, so... I- Let me-” He referred to a bullet pointed list on a one-sided document on his desk. “I hear you...” then

to something over Supervisor Gra's shoulder. "Unfortunately, on this occasion," he said, statically, "you may not stand."

Supervisor Gra pulled his seat further from the table, and bananas, and the telephone in shrink wrap. He landed in it and faced the digital time that engulfed the entire behind wall.

The time counted down from '09:59', flashing in red with every second removed.

His line-manager turned to check the time. He cocked slightly back as if it'd make any difference in being able to read the enormous clock. Once he turned back, he said, "Supervisor Gra, did you not see the small sign warning there was safety hazard in the packaging room? What did you expect? That the major concern to workers health was just going to be resolved?"

"No, I did not."

"Do you feel capable reading any small signs which indicate dangers unlikely to be resolved."

"Yes."

"Can you repeat it back to me?"

"I feel capable reading any small signs that indicates haz- hazards. I'm sorry, could you repeat what you're asking I repeat?"

"There's not enough time. It'll be in your inbox."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"May I ask, Supervisor _____, why is this specific issue with the cables in the packing room not being resolved? It's caused costly damage to three TBFRs."

"Costly not to the Company."

"Why do the participating organisations not argue that the Company cover the cost of their errors?"

"Because."

"Because?"

"Because."

"What?"

"Because, Supervisor Gra. Because because. Is that not a good enough reason? No, well then because we don't tell them what the additional costs are. And they don't ask questions because because, and so they don't, and so they should continue not to and do instead trust us to negatively streamline their workforces. Look at the data the Company provides for us. I have it here." Supervisor _____ lifted one of the only three documents splayed on his desk. "Of the participating organisations whose feedback was not lost during an unforeseen, logically impossible IT malfunction that we, without evidence, assure was no fault of the Companies and was in no way respondent to any severely negative feedback or in any way connected to the coincidental, hypothetical coordination of an 'IT malfunction' planned through executives' emails... sixty percent confirmed zero decrease in customer satisfaction with their services. And no change to retention. So, Supervisor Gra, you see... things have not got worse because of our work."

"Have they improved?"

"Can that really be objectively answered?" The line-manager sat back. "Our objective is not change. It's profit. And continuity."

"Aren't Reductions the opposite of change? Reductions, the process of changing volunteered workers, was a change from the initial name for the process which was 'Changes' which was confused with BC. 'Brain Changes' which is still in use."

"But Changes isn't. We don't call it Changes anymore. The point is redundant."

"But still, BCs and the process itself. The rest is unchanged."

"Yes, unchanged. Unchanged, not changed. That is my point."

"What?"

"Supervisor Gra." Supervisor _____ looked down again at his one-sheet document, "I hear you'. Before we can further discuss these concerns... I've remembered that I'd like to make some notes. Unfortunately.... I have left both my pen and a paper in the Supervisors Packaging room. You're closer to the door, I think it is logical to agree that you would retrieve the pen and the paper from the packaging room."

“I agree. Mind you... first... if you don’t mind, I should step out of the building and call my- er- my- my daughter? I should let her know that I’ll be staying late to further address these concerns.”

“How long do you need?”

“How long would one need to escape?”

“Interesting question.” Supervisor checked his document then the thing over ‘s shoulder. “Let me ask the Company.”

XIV:

from WTT sat upright in his seat in the practice room.

A red light appeared on a short switchboard of sorts. A something with very few buttons. rechecked instructions typed onto a printed one-page document before he tapped a key close to the light on the board and it changed to a white light.

“He- Hello?”

A separate screen next to the board displayed a generated reply.

hit another key.

“Hello,” a generated voice replied.

“Hi,” replied the customer. “How do I start? I’ve never had a session or really spoken about myself before. Can I know your name?”

The board processed the customer’s speech and the screen again displayed a reply.

hit the correct button.

“Although I assure you I care, it is preferred if I do not have a name.”

“O- Okay.”

“This session is limited to one session.”

checked the instructions for the board again.

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