



## [House of Lies](#)

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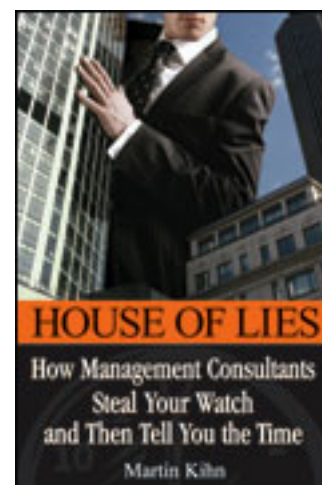
### **The Gentle Art of Feeding Back- or, a New Way to Grow & Hate Yourself**

It's very difficult to tell if you're serious or not," says the woman, feeding back. "I'm always serious," you say. "See what I mean?"

After a year you are sent to Feedback Camp. It is in the woods in New Jersey and, like most woods in New Jersey, right next to a large highway. Cars hurtle past your talk circles; they infiltrate the corners of your bed. The purpose of Feedback Camp is never quite clear, but you suspect it has something to do with teaching you to work well with other people. It is a mandatory week in the woods for all (surviving) associates . . . and it is by far your worst week with the firm.

By far. "My name is important to me," says the man in the military reserves, suppressing a quiet rage. "Of course it is, Jim." "My name is Jason."

The title of this week is "Consulting Team Skills," and you were supposed to have taken it shortly after joining the firm. In fact, it's supposed to be completed within six months of your start date, but things occurred. For instance, half the firm was fired. And all training programs were suspended. Morale among the lower ranks inexplicably began to plummet and so the partners decided to do what they presumed everybody did in moments of self-doubt: They hired a consultant. That consultant haunted the halls for a few weeks talking to the war-wounded and the battle-weary . . . and she reported back that what everybody needed was not an end to the madness, no, what they all needed was a



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week in the woods of New Jersey with their top-tier colleagues from around the world telling one another in excruciating detail just exactly what it is about them that makes them so difficult to work with.

What they needed was Feedback Camp. "What I wish," says the woman who talks too much, "is that you would talk more."

"About what?" "I just want to let you know that I'm feeling that you're not exactly hearing what I'm saying." "I'm *hearing* you." "What I'm feeling is I doubt it." "Can I give you some feedback now?" "It's not your turn."

"Well one of my feedbacks is you're hung up on whose turn it is--"

"Guys," says the moderator, a Mormon who makes you want to avoid Salt Lake City, "take a step back. Breathe. Center." There's a moment—just a moment—when nobody talks. Ah . . .

It's inculcated in the business school-bound that industry is all about "team work." In fact, it's so often used it's elevated to a single word: *teamwork*. You've got to work as a team. It's all about the team. You're only as good as your team. The team is more important than the individual. What's your role in the team? Which team are you on? You've got to report to the team; check in with the team; have team dinner, team lunch, team debriefing in the airport lounge.

It sounds strange to you, the first time you hear it: "We." A partner said it in a meeting your first or second week at the firm. He was walking past the team room, on his way to a different team meeting, and he steps in and gets to asking what your team is up to; so your team leader briefs him, and the partner asks a question about the client, which goes something like, "Do we have any capacity in Asia . . . ?"

*We?*

He means, of course, we, the client, the company that hired us. We are *we*. It's routine by now—this convenient linguistic fiction that we are actually employees of the companies we serve. There is no us and them; there's only us and us. The team. So ingrained is this usage, top-tier consultants even slip into it with the client.

"What we need to focus on," your principal says to a client in Dearborn one time, "is getting more value-added content onto the

handsets."

The VP looks unmoved. "I'll focus on that," she says. "Why don't you focus on getting the numbers right." We are amused.

So it is to build the narrative we that you are put into a cluster at Columbia Business School, and broken down into an independent project team, with a specific team role. It is in service of the we that you are on a home team at your top-tier firm, and a mentoring team, not to mention your actual work teams and subteams. When you see your friends from business school, always on a Friday night, you all refer to it as "team dinner." For that's what you are now-a team player. The problem is-it's all a lie.

There are no teams. Teams accomplish nothing. Good work is done in a cone of real quiet. Truth comes from the silence alone. Is this true? We don't know.

All we know is-right now-we hate other people. They're all so *critical*. Feedback Camp starts with an online questionnaire. It asks you to rate yourself along a number of dimensions supposedly correlated with the skills you are thought to need to do your job well, and it's sent to a dozen or so people who have worked with you. Your co-workers are asked the same questions, and they can jot down anonymous comments about what they like and don't like about your unruly personality. Most team members wisely choose to comment very little, but those that do give themselves away immediately. It is amazing how few words it takes to ferret out a voice.

"Marty has a magnetic, disarming personality," one says, and you immediately picture the job manager on the secret government project<sup>33</sup> down in Baltimore. It is the word disarming, a favorite of his in many contexts, most of them not related to the U.S. military.

"Marty needs to make sure he takes team members to meetings with the senior staff"-you know this guy at once, the reedy, picky fellow in Stamford who was obsessed with his free box of pears at the Hyatt. He walked past a room once when you were in there with the senior team members talking about what you should think about ordering for dinner, and the look on his face betrayed *such* abandonment . . .

The single biggest problem with Feedback Camp is that it used to take place in Brazil. There was training in the morning and beaches and Brazilians in the afternoon, and from what you hear the training was optional. They are becoming almost unbelievable—these stories of the past. There was a cruise the firm sponsored every year in August for the summer associates; an entire Carnival cruise liner was rented for a week so the kids and their spouses could spend tropical time with the partners in an informal setting of heaving waves and salt spray. Abruptly canceled last year, of course, these cruises have gained in debauched reputation since. An associate passed out in a stairwell. An associate threw up on a partner. An associate hosted a "train" in her cabin. There were castles rented in Scotland for the operations practice annual dinner, and there were strippers and worse charged to American Express with a wink. These stories of the "go-go '90s" always reminded you of something, and then you realized what it was. The "go-go '80s."

You'd like to go-go home right now. You're sitting around a conference room table in a windowless hutch in New Jersey, hearing what people think of you. There are four of you, including the Mormon moderator. You have spent a week together already and there are strong opinions in the room. The comments are supposed to be structured as one good thing (capability area), one bad thing (room for improvement), but it all sounds the same. Very bad.

"The thing I like about you," says the woman with the troubled teeth, "is . . . oh God, I knew I wrote this down somewhere." She fumbles with her index cards. "I'm sorry," she says at last, "I have to pass."

"Can-can you paraphrase what you were going to say?" prompts the Mormon. "I just can't remember."

The first day you were handed back the results of the online survey, including the anonymous responses of your coworkers and your own self-ratings. Your self-ratings were consistently lower than those of the others, and this depressed you.

You're supposed to go through the prefeedback, looking for patterns, then come up with a goal for the week around repairing your most glaring capability gap. Fixing what's most obviously wrong.

Once you've decided what your goal is, you gather in the windowless conference room that is to be your home with your three core team members and the moderator, and you do what hordes of businesspeople have done for decades in Basking Ridge, New Jersey-namely, you *share*. You tell these previous strangers your major fault and what you're going to do about it.

When you realize what you're going to have to tell them, you want to cry. It's just too perfect, as if you made it up. It turns this week in the woods into a magnificent postmodern business experiment.

Can you guess what your major fault turns out to be? Can you even imagine? It's this: *You don't like feedback*. Well.

Think about the irony of it-the sublime ridiculousness. The firm's considered feedback to you is you need to go to a camp to get feedback about yourself, and that feedback is: You don't want any feedback.

There's a lot of feedback in here. Your wife is, sadly, a musician; to her this word has other connotations. To her this word is repellent.

"Okay," says the Mormon, considering. "So what's your goal going to be for the week?"

"I'm going to ask for feedback." "Solicit it." "Yeah-solicit feedback. All week." "And on the job?"

"I'm going to ask for feedback from my co-workers. And my team leaders."

"And?" "And what?" "Anything else?" You think about it. "Not really." "What are you going to do with the feedback?"

Ah-that is the real question, isn't it? What are you going to do with the feedback. You suspect the truth-ignore it-is not, in the circumstances, acceptable.

"Listen to it." "And?" "Take it in." "And?" "Really listen."

"*Hear it.*" "Yes-hear it." "*Hear* the feedback and act on the feedback, right? And how are you going to do that-"

"Can I say something," interrupts the woman who talks too much, the one with the eating disorder and the terrible skin. She has been wanting to talk this whole time, and now she is going to talk.

You all turn to her. "I feel that Marty is mocking us."

Beginning consultants are always afraid of confronting this scene: The grizzled old VP of sales puts down his 7-Eleven carafe and hooks his thumbs into the ring of blubber at his belt. "Now what," he spits out, "do you know about my business? I've been forty years selling tires and you think you can come in here and tell me how to sell tires? How old are you, anyway? I've got shirts that're older than you, boy!"

Trouble is, that scene never happens. It's more common, as we have said, to have friends and parents question exactly what it is that you know about selling tires and how old are you, anyway? This kind of second-guessing of skill levels never happens for the simple reason that the clients know the answer. You're probably not that old, and you probably don't know that much about their business. You're a *consultant*, for God's sake. You don't work anywhere for forty years.

Consultants are not hired as experts. This is a misconception common among nonconsultants: that they are hired for their *knowledge*. They are not. They are hired to accomplish in very rapid order a daunting, discreet piece of fact-finding and analysis that they are then required to present in exceedingly clear and convincing form to their client. There may or may not be an element of strategic thinking in the presentation; there may or may not be a series of recommendations. These recommendations might seem to an outsider suspiciously like *telling the old guy how to sell tires*-but they are not. The recommendations are there, in the end, to make the consultant feel more like a manager and less like the hired help, but they are generally entirely ignored. The client knows where they came from, after all.

So consultants are not hired as experts, but they can never appear to be anything less than expertlike. The critical part of that word is -like. It's an act, a charade, a delightful pas de deux. But it is absolutely essential.

Your fourth or fifth month with the firm, you find yourself in a position that would be terrifying were it not so dirt common. You

are working for a happy client, a beer and hard liquor manufacturer in the midst of trying to restructure the way it deals with its distributors. As you have heard, alcohol is a great business to be in; since the days of moonshine, it has a large and avid customer base that will risk something like death to be served. And it has evolved over the years since Prohibition into a bewildering web of factors and third parties and state rent-a-cops that do nothing but sit and watch the cash wash in. It's extraordinary-the amount of money these people soak up for nothing.

Your particular client contact is a woman you've been warned about-a rather squat little person with a puzzled look who is draped in gray sweaters. It is the middle of summer. Her name is Cate, with a C. She's young, too, maybe twenty-eight or twenty-nine, and makes two times your salary for no reason at all. She used to work at McKinsey, but they fired her. Now she's head of something to do with realigning the organization or whatever.

And she always says, "Uh-huh . . ." She nods and says, "Uhhuh . . ." Hers is speech minus content; she's a human agreement machine.

So you are rather alarmed when, on the morning of your second day at the client site, she waddles up and says, "What are you doing right now?" "I was-" "Can you come to a meeting?"

The rule in these situations is to say: Yes. Whatever the client asks, you say: Yes. This much you know. "Yes."

As you enter the meeting room, she hands you a stack of pages not stapled together. They feel kind of wet, like a runner had strapped them to her body. They're out of order- you try to order them, absently, as you sit. Then it's quiet, and you notice something . . .

Everyone is looking at you. And there are a lot of them- maybe fifteen or eighteen. Some of them you recognize from yesterday, the get-acquainted meeting. These are senior people; actually, now that you reminisce, rather senior senior people. There's a tanned Welshman who is president of something. There's the client himself, the VP of sales. The HR woman, who has a distinctly VP-like aura and a colorful scarf. They're *senior* senior people and you're fumbling with a wet stack of pages and you're in the middle of the room and suddenly, suddenly it hits you-

You are alone. There are no other consultants in the room. Where are they? You turn to the woman who led you in, but she's talking. "Do you all know Marty?" she asks.

"We met yesterday," says the Welshman, and the bright light flashes off his teeth.

"He's with [your top-tier firm], as you know," she continues. "I thought I'd ask him to take us through some pages." Everyone is sitting. She turns to you and smiles. There is silence. Extended.

You start to talk-then stop. The pages are upside down; they're upside down and in a foreign language. No-it's English after all. They make no sense. You see a word there, an anchor. The word is *distribution*. And again, you start to talk.

"The purpose of today's meeting is to make sure we're all aligned on the distribution piece going forward-

"Sales and distribution," interrupts the Welshman, who bears a disarming resemblance to the actor Tim Curry. "Right-because what's the point of distribution if the product's going to sit there, right?" "Uh-huh . . . ?"

"Now-Cate asked me to take you through a few pages here. . . ." You look around the room and notice-nobody has any pages to look at. This would not be the case if you were leading them through some pages-"At some point-once we're all on the same page, so to speak. About the distribution. And sales."

You look desperately at Cate; she's checking e-mail on her Blackberry. Outside would be a magnificent view of the city of Stamford, Connecticut, if the blinds weren't all drawn. You could be in any ecru box in any faux city in the world. You might as well try.

"There has been a lot of work around distribution that's been done recently, over the past few-well, decades really. As you know, the tendency as transportation networks improve and information transfers happen instantly is-it's to try to streamline distribution to the point where all unnecessary middle steps are gone. What's not necessary-idle time spent sitting in warehouses. That's inventory, which is an element of working capital, it's equivalent to frozen assets. More than frozen, they're actually diminishing in value. So the work we've been doing-most of the

work-has been around this issue of trying to eliminate the transfer costs and inventory costs in distribution."

Is anybody buying this? Maybe you should move on to the liquor business . . .

"Now-the business we're in has an unusual structure-as, as you know. There are, for regulatory reasons, and other reasons, there are strong distributors between the manufacturer- us-and the outlets. There are requirements against direct distribution, which would be the way most industries are going. The issue is these distributors are getting a lot of . . . well, power-"

"We know all this," says the Welshman not unkindly. "What's important," says the woman with the scarf, "is what the new structure's going to be."

It occurs to you this could be an elaborate put-on. That Cate and the others are subjecting you to some kind of elaborate high-level new-consultant hazing ritual and in a moment they're all going to start laughing and spray champagne in your face. But no.

"What we'd like to know," you say carefully, "is what you're feeling about that." "About what?" "The new distribution structure. What would you do?" "Well-I . . ."

She doesn't have any more of an idea than you do about it, of course. None of them do. That's why you're sitting in this blacked-out room in the middle of nowhere like a bunch of goats. The distribution works fine; it doesn't matter. Everybody's getting rich. People are drinking themselves stupid and always will. You're filling up your day, and so are they. You remember a partner said once there are two fallback techniques to use in a desperate situation.

#### Consultant's Panic Buttons

1. Flatter the clients
2. Ask for their opinion

You decide to hit both buttons.

"Listen-you guys are the experts," you say with some passion. "You've lived with this business a lot longer than most of us have. We could talk about our opinions all day but ultimately you're the ones-you're going to know if it will actually work."

Button 1-check.

"So let me turn it around for a second, if it's okay. We'd really like to know-just in a kind of background, basic way- what you think would work in a situation like this."

Button 2-check.

"Well," says the woman with the scarf, "I don't think we should-"

"You know what we need," pipes a high voice from the end of the table-a guy you've never seen before in your life. He's wearing a blue blazer that seems to swallow him up. "What we need is a state-by-state discussion."

"Start in California," says the Welshman, liking this idea. You know he's spent time in the sun-just look at his leather skin replacement. "In some ways they're the most likely to let us go direct."

"I know that," says Blazer Boy. "But the dedicated resourcing we're talking about is already there in a lot of places." "Not in the North, with Alhambra and Giacometti . . ." And they're off.

Ask any consultant-he'll tell you. There is a moment in most client meetings when the client team starts to argue with itself, and those are the moments you dream about. You can check out and look concerned. The pressure is off. Now's the client's time to show her ignorance.

When you were a summer associate, ten months after you had entered business school and eleven months after you left your job on the television show, your job manager came into your cubicle and said, "We have a call right now."

And you said, "Okay." And she said, "It's right now." "Do you want to do it here?" "Do you know what it's about?" "You're telling me about it." "I don't know. Did you schedule it?" "I don't know anything about it."

"Who scheduled it? Where's Ken?" Ken was the principal. He was in the air right now between LGA and LAX. He was totally unreachable and it occurred to you that he was the person who scheduled the call.

"He's traveling," you said. "Oh shit." "Who's it with?" "Some guy named Jason." "When is it?" "Two minutes ago." "Do you have

the number?"

"Yes I have the number-how can we call without the number? All I have is the number."

She was getting hysterical, which seemed like an overreaction. "What do we know about Jason?" you asked her in what you hoped was a calming tone.

"

Fuck all. Nothing. We know his name is Jason and here's his number and we're calling him." You looked at the printed out e-mail with this information. It was from Ken.

"Can we reschedule?" you asked. "We have to call him." She was dialing, stabbing at the digits on your phone. The area code and prefix meant he was in the client's headquarters building in L.A. *Who was he?* "Jason here," he answered.

Your job manager had put him on speakerphone. "Hi, Jason, this is Lisa Han from [your top-tier firm], we had a call right now."

"That's right." "Sorry we're late. I'm here with my colleague Marty [your last name]. Is it okay to use the speaker?" "Okay."

There was a silence. Unfortunately, he didn't sound very friendly, and he seemed to be waiting for you to pick up the ball.

"Are you familiar with what we're up to, Jason?" you asked tentatively.

"Very familiar." "Have you seen the-the July eleventh update?" "Have it right here." "Great. Then we won't need to-to walk you through that deck." "No you won't."

This was very bad-you couldn't ask him who he was without sounding incompetent, and you couldn't really talk to him without knowing who he was. In the back of both your minds was the terrible feeling he was somebody very important. There are a handful of people on the client team who have the power to snap their fingers and make consultants vanish just like that. Was he one of these?

You hadn't yet learned the two consultant's panic buttons, which might not have worked with this Jason character anyway. But Lisa, bless her, got an idea.

"We were wondering, Jason-we don't want to take a lot of your time. But we've been working various angles of the problem trying to figure out how to put together a solution with you guys. And we wanted to-basically, to get your reaction to the way this thing is going."

"My reaction?" "Yeah-we wanted to know what your thoughts were-if you took a step back for a second-what you thought about the overall direction we're headed in and if you had any ideas-any *tweaks*-for something different?" He waited. Maybe we had lost him . . . But no: "You're asking for feedback?" "Uh-huh. On the overall direction." "Oh," he said, much less belligerent. "I can do that all right-"

Another irony of feedback is that, while to receive feedback requires good listening skills, the feedback itself is often about the quality of one's listening skills. Like tax breaks and complimentary beverage service, those who need it the most are the least likely to get it. Everybody knows that to talk is easy; to listen is not. There is a universal impulse to write, but not to read. We explode with life, burst with community; implode into silence. To listen is to question oneself, and this is terrifying.

Obscure Minnesota writing teacher and memoirist Brenda Ueland put it this way, once: "The true listener is much more beloved, magnetic than the talker, and he is more effective and learns more and does more good." What a nice woman.

The second day of Feedback Camp you take a multiplechoice test of listening "styles" called the "Listening Styles Inventory." It is one of those entirely transparent personality tests wherein questions are repeated at the end to see if you're paying attention. The questions are vaguely Jungian, like all personality test questions written since the days of Jung. Circle to what extent you agree with the following statements: "When someone is speaking in an angry tone I feel threatened . . ." "I usually take notes when I am attending a lecture . . ." "I am not afraid of speaking in public . . ." "When I am alone, I sometimes talk to myself . . ."

You try to answer in the way that will make you seem the most

extroverted. This is the way of the introvert in business. Your favorite question in this brief inventory is the second to last: "I seek out feedback on my work performance . . ." Highly disagree.

The Mormon collects your questionnaires to return them after a ten-minute break, which is lethal. Breaks are to be dreaded in these off-site training sessions. The simple reason is that there are entirely too many snacks. Since the cutbacks, all so-called training is held in a series of identical conference centers in the same ten-mile-square region of New Jersey near Basking Ridge, Bridgewater, and Morristown. This is ConferenceLand. Every conference center on the East Coast is here, and the only difference among them is whether they are ten or twenty yards from I-287. The rooms are equipped with fax machines that never receive a fax and cable boxes that never receive the Sci-Fi Channel or Comedy Central. Acres of landings extrude onto empty pre-entries to vacant meeting rooms with labels in the door pockets with the black name of some pharmaceutical company's "Sales Training B."

And in your oasis of hallway, outside the room where the Mormon silently assesses your ability to listen, are cartloads and bongloads of snacks: doughnuts and bear claws and fudge cookies in the morning, dextrously replaced by M&M's and Klondike bars and fudge brownies in the forenoon, relieved by slabs of chocolate cake and mounds of raw brown ice cream after an engorging lunch of cruel roast beef and Mounds. It is as though you are being tended by some force that wants to see you break-you will not leave here looking good.

It is the revenge of New Jersey upon its consultants. As so often happens, your colleagues from around the world all turn out to be from Chicago. You don't know what is happening in Chicago, but it appears to be something. People are there.

It is easy to strike up a conversation in such a setting-same firm, same generation, same J. Crew wardrobe-but who really wants to?

Nonetheless, you're reaching for a Fast Break when this very thin woman bumps up against you and apologizes. It would have been okay but she bounced off some fat in your side and you suddenly feel grotesque. Once, you were as thin as she is-

"Those are great," she says. "What are?" "Fast Break-those are new products, right? Reese's?"

You put it back in the bowl and look at her; she is smiling. Her hair is long and black and she dresses like a J. Crew boy, and she appears to be from India.

"I need to cut down." "Me too." There's a pause, as you decide you like one another. Those are good pauses.

"How's the feedback?" she asks. "It's okay, I don't know-how's yours?" "My problem is I'm not serious enough when I give the feedback."

"Who said that?" "The group said that-I'm not serious enough. But you know, it seems kind of silly to me that we're giving feedback to people we don't even know."

This-you could not agree with more. This woman really is not like the others.

"What's your problem?" she probes. "I'm not good at feedback." "Like how?"

"I don't like to give it very much, and I don't really want to get it."

She assesses you, thinking. "You know what-I don't think that's right."

"It came out of that team. They made that assessment." "It's not right-you proved it wasn't right when you told me you don't like to get feedback. See, that itself is feedback and you have no problem with it-so I don't think the problem is you don't want to get feedback at all. That's like a-a smoke screen. I think you're very clever, and you managed to construct this thing-this false problem." She's right of course, completely right.

"Why would I do that?" "Probably to show your contempt for this week. This whole camp thing."

You can't say anything. You have nothing to say to this. "Anyway," she whispers, "nobody likes to get feedback. And *nobody* likes to give it."

"My group does." "No," she says gently, "they don't." The military guy appears and pushes past you to get a Fast Break, not really making eye contact. "My name is Shelagh," she says to you. "I'm

from Chicago." The Mormon reappears and calls you back for your listening styles assessment.

Back in the little room, he goes around the room, starting with Military Boy. The short form of his feedback on the test instrument is this:

- Military Boy-High in Analytical Listening, Low in Empathetic Listening
- Troubled Teeth Woman-High in Analytical Listening, Low in Empathetic Listening
- Talky Girl-Low in Analytical Listening, High in Empathetic Listening
- You-High in Analytical Listening, Low in Empathetic Listening

Question: Can you spot the nonconsultant in this group? That's correct-it is Talky Girl, who is actually an HR person who has come up from your firm's headquarters and is auditing the Feedback Camp for the purpose of being able, at some point in the future, to be a group session facilitator. In other words, she's in training to be a trainer, like the Mormon.

"What we have found," says the Mormon anticlimactically, "is that there's remarkable consistency across the classes, over the years. The listening styles for people drawn into consulting are pretty much consistent."

He puts up a graph that entirely backs up his point; so much so it looks like false data. Analytical listening is an average of nine out of ten over the thousands of associates who have cycled through this camp-and empathetic listening comes in around a three. There is another slide, this one charting the results of partners who have taken the assessment. Strangely, they are a bit more empathetic.

"We're not sure what this means," says the Mormon. "Maybe they're more relaxed," says Talky Girl, betraying her superior empathy skills-which, quite frankly, you had not observed. But then, you're probably too analytical to notice. This feedback was a good learning for you, it turns out. You realize you are in an environment where nobody has any feelings. Including you.

Feelings almost appear the next day, after you cross the Acid River and hurtle yourself through the Web of Pain. The acid river is not, of course, a real river-it is a metaphor created by consultants hired by your consulting firm to train consultants in how to give feedback, this time in an outdoor setting. The metaphor-creating consultants are not like you: They wear khaki shorts and sport mustaches and tans. They are handsome men and quite flirtatious with the few ladies, including, you notice, Shelagh.

"What we need you to do," explains one of the handsome men in khaki, entirely at ease under a large shade tree, "is to get across that river." He points to an expanse of threadbare lawn within yards of the superhighway. Two long orange ropes mark the banks of the river, and on the far bank there is a pile of wooden boards. The river itself has "rocks" in it: irregularly spaced gray cinder blocks. It seems you will have to cross the river on the boards, supported by the cinder blocks, with a twist:

"The whole team has to get over to the other side. All of the boards have to get over to the other side. And none of the boards can touch any part of the river, just the cinder blocks." It is an exercise in geometry, as well as balancing on narrow boards holding hands with a person from Chicago you don't know. You saw it in business school as well-people appear, usually men, usually in their late-or even mid-twenties, usually shorter than average-people appear and decide they are in charge and yap and yak and push people here and there like sheep in the meadow. Then, after a few minutes of futility, another person appears, this one usually a woman, also young, perhaps average height-a woman appears, and figures out the answer.

"Put one board across the cinder blocks. Then put another board on that board and a cinder block." At the time, in context, this is a brilliant observation. She doesn't help with the web of pain, but that is not a brain puzzle. It is an exercise in lifting people up and putting them down. They're lifted by the team, stiffen their bodies, keep their hair pinned down, and are passed through a web that looks like an acrobat's net turned vertically. There are dire consequences for touching the plastic mesh on the way through the web.

For the debrief, you retire to a porch next to the tennis courts as the sun goes down over ConferenceLand and you assemble fold-up chairs into a time-honored circle of truth. The head khaki man is glowing with health, while the rest of you are itchy and smell.

The highway gets louder. You could really use a Fast Break.

After a moment to respect the moment, the khaki man says, "What did we learn from the web of pain and the acid river?"

The correct answer is: *Nothing*. Nobody says it. And you are astonished, but nobody tries to be funny. They are surpassingly serious, this new class of drones.

"We learned that it's really important to work as a team."  
"And . . . ?" "And that's all." "What did you learn about working as a team?"

"That it's really important." "Besides that?"

Blank looks-when you start this far from the truth, it is almost impossible to leave the realm of cliché. Debriefing phoniness requires phoniness in return. And as you pack up the boards and disassemble the web of pain, you find yourself working beside the junior khaki man, the one with the mustache, and you venture: "So . . . what were we supposed to learn from this?"

It was now a pile of aluminum poles and a mess of mesh in the dirt.

"I don't know," he says not thoughtfully. "I think you're supposed to tell us."

Every year, either in March or in September depending upon when they started work, the members of your firm are appraised using a method called "360 Degrees." This refers not to the temperature of the appraisee but to a concept of fairness wherein all those *around* the victim are contacted to deliver their feedback: underlings, peers, superiors, and the superiors of superiors who may have something to say. This feedback is delivered anonymously to an appraiser who, by definition, does not know the victim or, if she knows him, has not worked with him. Thus, the appraiser is free to form a negative impression of the victim based not upon personal loathing but upon off-the-record insults delivered by those in a better position to be unimpressed. Once all "360 Degrees" of co-workers have been interviewed, the appraiser completes a six-page appraisal feedback form, which attempts to inject objectivity into what is essentially a binary process-she is/is not good-by forcing observations into various matrices and "skill areas" supposedly

useful for executing the job. Strengths are called "core competencies." Weaknesses are called "development areas."

Once complete, the appraisal document is discussed in the course of a two-day set of meetings. Only staffers of a higher rank than the appraisee are welcome-no peers. The appraisee/victim herself is not invited. A verdict is reached, often within minutes. The next victim's appraiser appears.

Some weeks later-and, at times, not at all-those victims not immediately relieved of their livelihoods will sit down with the appraiser and receive the "feedback," with particular emphasis upon the development opportunities identified. It is made clear that, if these development opportunities are not addressed, there will be no more appraisals.

Now, some at the firm like this "360 Degree"/anonymous system and believe it is "as fair as it can be."

You would disagree, based upon two facts:

**Fact 1:** The appraisal interviews are conducted off a list drawn up by the victim herself. The only people contacted to provide feedback are those the victim has named, giving appraisees some real discretion in weeding out sources of trouble. Few of us are universally loathed; there are usually only pockets of antipathy. A job manager cannot be excluded, of course, without the appraiser getting wise. But job managers are rarely the problem. The problem is peers-all those mini- Machiavellis gaming the system by doing body slams on as many hapless peers as they can. Or perhaps peers who have seen through you to the inept depths below the glib surface. Whoever-these can be neutralized via a carefully honed list.

**Fact 2:** The appraisal is a charade. Fact 2 may require some explanation. You are too angry to explain the obvious, that the appraisal process provides an arbitrary Potemkin facade to an equal-opportunity maw of destruction. You are angry because you learned something, about four weeks after Feedback Camp ended, from which the only things you took away were eight pounds of ugly fat plastered to your sides and a bad case of low self-esteem.

You learned that, after her appraisal, they fired Shelagh. Her feedback was she didn't "know how to listen."

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