

THE BIG FLAMEOUT

The collective doubts of millions of corporate cogs were swiftly confirmed during Bob Gershon's retirement party when he summed up his forty-five-year career in three words: "Blah. Blah. Blah."

Up until that point, the party had followed the typical program for a farewell event. About fifty of us from various departments had gathered in the boardroom mid-afternoon, and were treated to a dessert spread fit for a group five times larger than those in attendance. We secretly eyed the pastel macarons and chocolate truffles with gold leaf while pretending to be engrossed in conversations with colleagues, who were also seemingly uninterested in the sweets just an arm's length away. This dance lasted for a few minutes until one brave soul, under the pretext of, "Maybe I'll just get a piece of cantaloupe," made the plunge. The flock took her cue and proceeded with methodical efficiency to graze its way from one end of the table to the other. The only survivor left in its path was an untouched tray of melon.

One of our firm's directors called up the man of

honor. A slightly stooped figure, wearing a suit that was tailored when the frame beneath it was a little more filled out, pulled himself from a conversation and made his way through the crowd. The room broke into applause, and a few folks patted the old man on the back, and with each encouragement the shoulders stooped ever so slightly more, seemingly uncomfortable with the attention showered on them.

The director read aloud from a framed Honorary Proclamation studded with “hereby” and “whereas” and “thereunto.” His oratory was interspersed with harassment-proof jokes and served marvelously as a textbook for office humor that was both politically correct and consistently unfunny. The final presentation was of a Tiffany box, and the room collectively took a step forward in anticipation of the contents about to be revealed. It was customary to award associates on their anniversaries with one of those pale blue boxes. And as the years advanced, so did the quality of its contents—a silver pen at five years, a crystal candy dish at fifteen, and so on. Forty-fifth anniversary gifts had a unicorn-like fascination; no one believed they existed but all were open to being disproved.

“Thank you,” Bob said with the box in his hands. “I’ll open this later at home.” The room let out an almost imperceptible moan. Forty-five-year Tiffany treasures were not meant for us mortals.

It was a typical Bob move, one that I had witnessed him perform for as long as I’d been at the firm. My first encounter with the man came early in my career. I found myself in a large meeting on the topic of a benefits program that had gone over budget and failed to show

any semblance of a return on investment. My involvement was as the junior HR man who had a small role in the measurement of the program's dismal results. It was getting heated in the room, with recriminations flying. Bob calmly stood up among the fury and asked me to join him outside the conference room. There was a mini-emergency that needed to be addressed, he told the room. I warily listened to him explain what he needed, but it ended up being some random task that could have been done at any time by one of the secretaries. I resented being sent off on such a trivial errand. Only later did I realize that this was Bob's way of saving my career.

Back in the room, the fingers were pointing, and it was only a matter of time before they landed on the guy standing on the lowest rung of the corporate ladder. I never forgot that act of generosity, and when I found myself reporting to him as I had been for the last ten years, I couldn't have been happier. Now, on his retirement day, I was sad to be losing the only man I'd considered a mentor.

"So, I did some math," Bob began, pulling a folded piece of paper from his coat pocket. Putting on his glasses, he read from the sheet: "My forty-five-year career translates into ninety-three thousand, six hundred, and very soon-to-be thirty-six hours of work. In twenty-four-hour increments, that's a total of 3,900 days spent right here in this office. Those good at math can already tell you that comes out to ten and a half years. Think about that—ten straight years of twenty-four-hour days spent in one building."

"Sounds like a prison term!" some jokester felt the need to add. And because of the corporate world's

inability to let an obvious joke pass, someone else piled on with, “And two weeks off for good behavior!”

Pausing to let the fake laughter subside, Bob continued. “When I started, we just called it *work*. There was a lot of work to do, and as the years went by, the more work we did.” There were a lot of satisfied looks in the room from those who belonged to the self-selected club of the truly hardworking. “But as time progressed, we started referring to this work as *projects*. Eventually, even that word wasn’t good enough. It was good enough to build the atom bomb but not sufficient for the kind of work we were doing. Some starry one introduced *initiatives*, and that really took hold. Like a virus, this spawned an inordinate number of new terms, all describing the same thing. Suddenly, we had *key dependencies* and *core deliverables*. There was a period where we even lost track of time, as *future forward* became standard language even though it would take a metaphysics professor to untangle that logic. Someone from a long line of seventeenth-century English surveyors brought us *milestone*. I really liked that one. I personally have passed enough milestones to have circled the earth.”

Associates chuckled at the harmless inanity of corporate jargon, but I sensed something darker underneath his words. There was something in his voice and the way it was leading us to an uncertain, but certainly bleak, ending that I didn’t want to be around to witness.

“Then militarism came back into fashion, and everything we did was now a *strategy*, and everyone doing it was a *strategic thinker*. You really didn’t want to be labeled *tactical*, because that dirty word was relegated to the boys in the trenches who were unable to see five feet

in front of them. Soon we had swarms of folks *visioning* our way forward to a place where *synergies* and *parallel paths* would *ladder up* to some corporate Valhalla.”

The crowd was starting to splinter among the True Believers and the Doubters. The former smiled obliviously while the latter stared at their shoes.

“Leave it to kids to boil it down for you,” Bob continued. “Last week my granddaughter asked me, ‘What do you do?’ That phrase has become the standard form of identification in contemporary life. It’s so ingrained that even children lead with it. Well, I told my granddaughter that I work in Human Resources. But that wasn’t enough, because she then innocently asked, ‘But what do you *do*?’ And I sort of had to think about it for a second.”

Finally, we were at the moment in the speech when Bob, the man with double or triple the experience of almost everyone in the room, would impart his wisdom and provide meaning to the lives we lived. It could go several ways.

I help people reach their true potential.

I make sure that we’re in a better place than we were yesterday.

I watch over the lifeblood of any corporation—the people.

Bob Gershon went a different route.

“Folks, I couldn’t answer her. Forty-five years of work, good old-fashioned hard work, and I couldn’t think of a single meaningful thing that I had accomplished. I mean, I worked in ‘Human Resources.’ It sounds made up, doesn’t it?” He laughed but no one joined him. “We’ve reached a point where we manufacture roles whose sole

purpose is to watch over other roles.”

In just a few short sentences, Bob Gershon invalidated the daily struggles of everyone in the room. But he did it as I knew Bob would—with dignity.

“Last week,” he said, “I came to a startling conclusion. I had a long, successful career but I didn’t have a job.”

The True Believers bristled at the brazen questioning of their entire belief system. Even the Doubters weren’t prepared for this apocalyptic representation of their existence and started to drift out of the room. And I just grew incredibly morose; not for having had to witness the old man’s public meltdown, but for acknowledging that I shared his thoughts, often dreamt of this day and doing just what he did, but knowing I could never muster the courage to actually pull it off.

“Why didn’t you quit if you hated it so much?” a shrill voice shouted out, but the question seemed directed more at the woman who asked it than at Bob. As if sensing that, Bob waited for her to answer, which she did, internally, and by the resigned look on her face, she apparently came to the same conclusion that he had.

As with all great flameouts, this one ended not in a fireball but in a sputter. “I do appreciate all of this. I hope I imparted...something from the heart...” he said, scanning the room as people left in droves. “Anyway... thank you for coming.”

And then it was just the two of us and the crew cleaning up the dishes. Bob gathered his stuff, including the Tiffany box. I brought him his coat.

“Well, that didn’t go as I thought it would. I was

hoping to inspire a few people.” *By telling them their lives were meaningless*, I thought. The unintentional enormity of his actions hit him at that moment—I saw it in his eyes. “Walk me out?” he asked, more like a plea.

I did just that, in silence.

We waited for a few moments by the elevator banks, and as the elevator chimed, Bob turned to shake my hand.

“Goodbye, Mr. Restic.”

There were no empty promises of keeping in touch and meeting for lunch down the road, because we both knew neither would happen. Bob stepped onto the elevator, but before the doors could close, he lunged forward and thrust a purple-veined hand between the sensors. “Chuck!” he called out as he stood in the threshold. I turned back, waiting too much like a young man at his father’s deathbed for some last scrap of advice on the life that awaited him. Bob started to say something, thought better of it, and shuffled back into the elevator.

The doors noiselessly closed out his career.