

## *A FIASCO OF MY OWN DOING*

**M**y firm paid them upward of a million dollars each year to spout nonsense, but everyone agreed it was money well spent.

Power of One® was both a misleading and accurate name, for the company consisted of two full-time employees—but only one who really mattered. Like most leadership consulting firms, they were centered around a single personality. Any additional employees were really only there to serve as vessels for the founder's wisdom. After years of spewing someone else's thoughts, the people working in such a place tended to shed their employee status and take up the mantle of the acolyte, and the founder attained near mythical status.

Julie St. Jean relished that.

Like many people who command a room, Julie actually spoke very little. Her business partner, Rebecca, did all the talking, but Julie was the only one you heard. She

would quietly survey the training sessions from somewhere off to the side of the room, most often with a cup of tree-bark tea that she studied with the determination of one of the world's great thinkers unraveling one of the world's great issues. At some point in the session she would politely ask Rebecca if she could add to the discussion. She wouldn't come to the front of the room. Instead, she'd remain in some hard-to-see place and wait while those in attendance turned and craned their necks in her direction. She would begin in a faint whisper, the intended result being that everyone in the room was forced to lean in to catch what she had to say. What came out was often a masterful display of subterfuge.

"Sometimes," she'd begin haltingly, "the hardest decisions in life are the ones you don't actually make."

Everyone in the room would collectively nod their heads as one might after hearing something truly profound. And if you somehow missed it, lead instructor Rebecca would let a few moments of silence hang out there to allow Julie's words to fully sink in before returning to the session. It was too often the longest five seconds of my life.

"Food for your brains," Julie would finish with a shrug, appearing almost embarrassed to have spoken in the first place. "Do with it what you will, if anything."

The false humility was lost on everyone. They gobbled it up. No one ever took the next step and actually reflect on the words long enough to realize that everything she said was gibberish.

Her personal branding helped sell it. She had a mes-

merizing mane of silver hair that transformed her plain, gray eyes into something bright and lively. She sported a uniform of sorts that consisted of oversized, white button-down shirts with the sleeves rolled up and flowing black pants. In combination, the ensemble took on an Eastern flair like that of a progressive karate sensei, one who could unleash a silent, roundhouse kick to the face at any moment. That potential threat was further enhanced by the fact that she had an unnaturally deep voice—deeper even than many men. I remember her first exchange with my old friend Easy Mike.

“I’m Julie,” she said in her usual baritone.

“Bullshit you are!” said Easy Mike, but sensing yet another HR sit-down in my office, he quickly recovered. “No one this young,” he said like a dutiful supplicant, “could speak with such wisdom.”

Easy Mike was right about that aspect. Julie St. Jean still had a striking youthfulness, despite her advanced middle age. It was hard to tell how old she actually was, but I had personally known her for twenty-plus years. And in that time I had grown to respect her—albeit begrudgingly—if for no other reason than for her absolute mastery of our company.

Julie St. Jean’s multi-decade-long campaign to land (and hold) the contract with my firm was executed with a strategy straight out of a missing chapter of Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. She realized early on that while executive coaching could be a lucrative venture, it required a constant pipeline of fresh, insecure executives to keep the coffers full. You could make a living off of it but

the opportunity was limited. To make the leap into the big money you had two choices: package your stuff into a series of seminars and books (a very tough proposition that typically led to more failures than successes) or bring your program not just to the executives of the firm but to the entire firm itself.

To take on a herd the size of our corporation, common sense would say you should start with the weak and sick trailing in the back of the group, the easy prey. Make your foothold there, use them to spread the word, and then steadily make your way up the ranks. But common sense would steer you wrong, because there are no grassroots movements in a corporation. Everything is top-down. What Julie St. Jean realized was that she needed to take down the biggest bull in the herd in order to own the herd.

That bull was my boss, Pat Faber.

I've always felt that salesmen were the easiest pigeons, and as such, con men made the easiest marks. The ones who can spin a tale are the ones most susceptible to someone else's. Pat Faber was an obvious choice. His career path somewhat paralleled that of Julie St. Jean. In many ways, they grew up together. Undeserved confidence and homespun aphorisms garnered Pat a reputation as a no-nonsense problem-solver. He rode that image to a level at the firm that got him an office with a mountain view through a three-paneled window.

The pyramid scheme worked its way down to my level about seven years ago. Everyone agreed that the entire company—not just the executives—could benefit

from the wisdom of Julie St. Jean and Power of One, but it just wasn't feasible for those two individuals to teach all four thousand employees. What if, came the retort, we could "empower" a few associates at the firm to do the teaching for us (and pay a per-student fee back to Power of One)? My name inexplicably came up as the person to coordinate all of it. This afforded me a front-row seat to a brilliant display of corporate survival.

Julie St. Jean was many things, but mostly she was someone who ferociously fought for—and maintained—relevance. Her secrets were having her finger on the pulse of what people wanted and the ability to continuously reinvent herself.

She made her mark in the 1980s, during the testosterone-filled, greed-is-good period in Corporate America. She offered a no-bullshit tract that made it easier for executives to act like pigs when their coach, a woman no less, told them to. She threw out the "straight talk" schtick once the recession hit in the 1990s and CEOs were publicly a little more contrite and shamed by their excesses. That's when she began one of her Zen programs. The internet age launched a series of Innovate | Ideate | Invigorate seminars, and the most recent period was dominated by Socially Responsible Leadership, some vague, positive-sounding message to help justify ever-escalating executive-compensation levels.

Two weeks ago, the nonsense came to a crashing halt.

After twenty-five years of inanity, Power of One finally took that bold step into fiasco. The cruel truth that

haunts every consultant business is that the dog-and-pony show works until it doesn't work anymore. I didn't relish what was to be their eventual replacement for another consulting firm with a different, shiny bauble but I didn't have much sympathy, either. They had made millions from us for many years and, as far as anyone could tell, had accomplished nothing.

The dismantling of Power of One was, in typical corporate fashion, a multi-year effort. They were never outright fired but rather were slowly starved to death. We gradually weaned ourselves off their programs until they reached a point where the caloric intake was no longer sustainable.

As if sensing the end was near, Julie St. Jean rallied for one last reinvention, or, as I imagined it, a death throes. The new program was a bit of a *mélange* of all their programs with a few new ideas thrown in. It reeked of desperation.

They added a third member to the act, a caricaturist, or, as she was introduced to me, a "Visioning Artist." For a time I thought she was a mute because she said nothing. She wore her hair long, a blond, frizzy mess that descended the entire length of her back. During brainstorming sessions she skipped around the room like a maiden at the Renaissance Faire, only her instrument wasn't a lute but a giant sketchpad. With a wedge of charcoal she captured the "essence" of the discussions in manically rendered mood drawings. She cranked these things out, tearing them from the pad and letting them fall to the floor as she moved on to the next rendering.

By the end of the session, the room looked like a bomb had gone off.

One jokester with a track record of inappropriate behavior enthusiastically participated in a brainstorm on what makes a healthy ecosystem. He rattled off responses like a leadership coach with the hiccups:

*“Ramrod-straight ethics...”*

*“A hard-line on discipline...”*

*“A consistent thrust...”*

Only when he used the word “girth” did I realize what he was doing. We spent the better part of the day walking on thinly veiled sketches of erect penises.

That’s when Pat Faber dropped in. The semi-pornographic drawings crunched under his loafers as he made his way to the center of the room, where he slowly surveyed the scene with his hands on his hips. He picked up a white theater mask we had been using to help develop full-body expressions. He looked disgusted.

“Supposed to, um, ‘uninhibit’ us so we can communicate more clearly together,” I sheepishly explained. Even their biggest disciple couldn’t defend this one, and it showed on his face. “Listen, Pat, we need to talk about this,” I began, trying to ease into the difficult discussion about breaking protocol and just killing his darling in one swoop.

“Yes, we do,” he replied in a defeated voice.

I was overcome with an odd feeling of sadness for the old man. He was universally regarded as a buffoon and this spectacle was further proof of that, but I still felt a little remorse in having to deliver the message.

“Well, we gave it a good effort,” I consoled.

“Maybe,” he answered cryptically. Pat held up the white mask like it was a weapon. “I hope you can show some tangible results from this program of yours,” he warned, and let the mask slip from his fingers.

I processed his words as the white face settled on the floor and stared blankly back up at me.

“Management committee meets on Monday next week,” he said. “Come prepared to give an update.”

I watched him leave, feeling the mixture of frustration and admiration normally reserved for the end of a magic trick. As your card is miraculously pulled from the performer’s pocket, you admire his cleverness and equally despise him for tricking you.

Somewhere along the way, and I wasn’t really sure when, I had landed on the hook for this debacle. And what had been a fiasco that I could once watch as a spectator from the shore now threatened to bring me down with the ship.