

JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES

“I wouldn’t let no man talk to me like that! If I was you, I’d . . . Excuse me?”

The attractive young receptionist paused, the sound of irritation spilling from her voice as Nick Costello stood in front of her. “Can I help you?”

Her dark eyes looked past him as if he weren’t really there. Her chewing gum snapped once and then again.

“I’m here to see Allison Smith. Jorge Pacheco sent me over.”

Nick assumed the executive director’s name would catch the receptionist’s attention. He was wrong. A broken solar nail as red as her sunburst lipstick had captured her undivided attention.

“Just a minute. Take a seat over there.”

She flicked her broken nail in the direction of a stained, orange couch across the waiting room. “What’s your name? Mr. Costa? Costowitz?”

She made no attempt to pronounce his name correctly as she speed-dialed Allison’s number.

Nick sat down as far from the stains as possible, warily surveying the rest of the waiting room. Painted a dim, gray green, its overhead fluorescent lights missing one long bulb, the room was so drab and faded that the journalist felt even more downhearted. The Alliance work group meeting had ended with a long review of lobbyists’ names for future contacts. The only upbeat note was that members had readily agreed for Nick to check out their operations later that week. He’d just spent the morning at Jason Levy’s hospital, sitting in with his executive team at their biweekly meeting. Given the meeting’s emphasis on cost overruns, the hemorrhaging state of Medicaid reimbursements, and the executive committee’s plans for a TV marketing campaign for its top-rated clinics, Nick had had a hard time

finding at the medical center a glimmer of the presumably public/nonprofit style that his editor was looking for.

Jason had confirmed his concerns in a private meeting afterward. “Look, we operate in as corporate a manner as GM. I know that. But we’re also losing money daily, and we can’t just raise prices on a new medical program model like it’s a Buick. Health costs are already going through the roof. We have outpatient clinics in a number of social service agencies, including Morrissey’s. So I joined the Alliance because I respect Pete and my daily numbers tell me something’s got to change. I’m not counting on the Alliance as the only answer. Maybe it’s part of one. I’ve told my board we’ve got to look at lots of avenues to stem this tide of red ink.”

“But that’s a service issue, not a management difference. My editor isn’t interested in another tail of woe on service cuts or out-of-sight medical costs.”

Nick had left the meeting with Jason frustrated. The medical chief had turned him over to the executive vice president in charge of the clinics.

Thinking about the morning as he thumbed through a discarded year-old copy of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Nick at least had appreciated Jason’s honesty. He wouldn’t have to waste a lot of time trying to find something that wasn’t there. The medical executive also had agreed to let him come back and sit in on marketing sessions for the sleep clinic and the hospital’s new prosthetic unit. Maybe the organizations he’d visit would fall on a continuum, Jason suggested. Perhaps Nick could write a comparison piece about all of them. Whatever else, the medical director wryly remarked, he was certain his outfit didn’t look a lot like Helen Jacques’s South Bronx Multi-Services.

The medical center didn’t look a lot like Jorge Pacheco’s downtown program site, either. The former’s gleaming white walls were in stark contrast to the gloomy, musty surroundings in which Nick was now sitting. The bulletin board across the room was overflowing with notices for events, job postings, and federal and state regulations requiring public notice. Except for the latter,

half of the flyers were out of date, inviting people to baby showers held a month ago or announcing job fairs long past. *I guess they weren't kidding about counting pennies.* On this bulletin board, one thumbtack did the work of three.

“Mr. Costaw . . . Excuse me?”

It was the receptionist, the unfocused irritation back in her voice. “Mrs. Smith just buzzed. She is running late. She will be out in 10 minutes.”

Not waiting for his response, the young woman quickly returned to reading the most recent copy of *In Style* magazine.

Nick got up to get a drink from the water cooler. The receptacle had no cups. Not bothering to ask for one, he returned to thumbing through the recipe section of the magazine. The braised chicken and curried rice with mango looked delicious.

A short, no-nonsense-looking Black woman with dark, half-moon circles underneath her eyes appeared and motioned him to enter the main office. “Mrs. Smith asked me to come get you. Did the receptionist explain what happened? No?”

Her open, expressive face betrayed a moment's frustration. She looked at Nick so directly it almost startled him. “I apologize. We're on our third girl at the front desk in the last 6 months. Seems most of them take the job as their own answering service, not ours.”

She sighed, hands on hips. Her arms were thick and strong and fit snugly against her magenta blouse. The woman's stance somehow managed to give off an equitable mix of weariness and determination. “I have no patience for that nonsense. A job is where you *work!*”

She sighed again as she quickly beckoned him to enter the agency's inner offices. “Work. What a concept.”

The administrator, who went by the name Regina Courtney, explained that she served under Allison Smith as the site director for programs. Allison was here from the executive offices uptown to review next year's budget and its shortfalls and to begin the strategic action planning process. Jorge had wanted Nick here to see up close how Regina, Allison, and others actually operated as managers.

“We’re late because I’m late. I was here last night until 2 a.m. working on a grant for one of our after-school programs. Sex-ed stuff for fifth-grade boys. We’ve learned that’s when you have to start!”

Regina managed a half-smile. “This morning I was doing coverage for our Head Start director. He’s been out with a bleeding ulcer. Medication hasn’t helped. There was a parents’ meeting we just had to have. With those new proposed regulations from Washington on attendance, they were all pretty upset. I had to be there.”

The warmth of her smile momentarily removed the fatigue from her face. “So Allison covered for me with morning clinical supervision for our mental health outpatient program. I’d had to cancel two other times on my staff, so she filled in. If new social workers don’t get support, they leave. Too many leave too soon as it is.”

Nick saw a glimmer of possibility. “So as a manager you’re more like a jack-of-all-trades?”

“And master of none.”

Regina laughed out loud. “Who can master anything on 4 hours of sleep a night, other than my 22-year-old daughter?”

She went on more seriously. “If you’re going to stay in this business, you have to wear a lot of hats. And you have to do a lot of things. Depending on the hour of the day, I’m a clinical supervisor, program director, chief custodian, whatever it takes. All of us managers are. Allison Smith is one of the best of them. That’s why she oversees all the programs.”

“Allison Smith, associate executive director for programs.”

Her handshake was as firm as her introduction. A middle-aged White woman whose large size was nicely disguised by her stylishly draped Eileen Fisher pantsuit, she motioned for Nick to join the three women and one man at the long, rectangular table. “You’ve already met Regina, a lady who gives new meaning to the term ‘no problem’! We couldn’t run this site without her. I’ll let everyone do their intros.”

Her hand swept the table in front of her. “People, this is Mr. Nick Costello. Jorge wants us to give him a no-holds-barred

look at how we manage things. He's doing an in-depth piece on that Alliance I told you about."

The blank but open faces in front of Nick suggested nobody knew what she was talking about but everybody would gamely try to remember.

Allison turned to the reporter before they started. "And get some coffee and a jelly doughnut. Nobody survives around here for long without a little sugar high!"

The group members chuckled in affirmation as they began their intros.

Nick took the remaining sugar-covered Krispy Kreme and sat down next to a young, dark-skinned African American woman, her hair beautifully braided in neat rows that fell just to her neck. "I'm Ashira Harris, director of after-school programs. We have 350 kids 'K through 6' at two different schools, funded mostly through foundations and some Board of Education money. And I prefer the chocolate-raspberry."

The multicolored ivory bracelets on her wrist slid down her graceful arm as she delicately picked up the last bite of her pastry.

"Gilsea Carrera, administration and fiscal. I cook the books."

The dark-haired, middle-aged woman with a lilting Puerto Rican accent suddenly looked embarrassed. Her mouth instantly curled down in fear, age lines running into her dimpled chin. "I don't mean *cook* cook. I mean I have to work on getting all the numbers to line up! I only cook at home!"

She looked around the table, her dimples working overtime. "People, help me!"

She quickly gulped her coffee, reaching for her glazed doughnut at the same time. Folks laughed warmly, allowing her defensiveness to melt away a bit. Nick nodded to let her know that he knew she wasn't serious. He put a tiny check next to her name. *Just in case.*

"Matt Modica, head of operations. Me and my guys keep the place running, whether it's toilets overflowing or tile floors to replace."

Dressed in spotless khaki work clothes and a florid purple tie, the White man at the end of the table had an accent made all the stronger by its mix of southern Italy with South Brooklyn. Boasting thick, strong arms that suggested deep familiarity with heavy lifting, Matt had the only plate with three doughnuts. His smile was relaxed, his face open. The pimpled redness around his neck suggested he'd shaved a little too closely that morning.

"Gwendolyn Wilson, director of the homeless shelter. We care for 30 women and their families here."

About 35 years old, attired in a fashionable pantsuit of light green that perfectly matched the frames to her glasses, her straightened black hair pulled tightly into a bun, the lovely African American woman sitting next to Matt caused Nick to blink twice as he took in her almost regal presence. In front of her was a notepad, opened to the middle. Underneath the pad sat a neatly stacked pile of papers about a half-inch thick, which she had just straightened for the third time that morning. "As you will soon learn about me, I run a very tight ship."

She looked around at the group and smiled lightly. "And I *never* eat doughnuts!"

Her colleagues groaned in a friendly manner at what was obviously a familiar comment. Matt leaned closer to her as he took a huge bite of a sugar doughnut, grains of powdered sugar landing on Gwendolyn's notepad. She shook them off in mock horror, slapping the pad against Matt's muscular shoulder. The papers needed to be straightened again.

"Mr. Costello, as you can see, we can have fun. People who work hard in our field deserve a little levity along the way. A touch of sugar doesn't hurt either. Don't mistake this foolishness for how we operate."

Allison spoke with genuine fervor, her blue eyes bright with intensity, her entire right arm moving in a sudden, up-and-down motion. "Matt's on call 24/7. So's Gwen. They'll both show up here day or night. Ms. Wilson will stay with her residents and their children no matter what when her own workers are out . . . family matters, personal plans, what have you. Matt missed a family barbecue just last Sunday."

The custodial supervisor rolled his eyes in mock horror at the memory.

Nick sensed that at last he was on to something. “People are obviously dedicated at your agency. Is that what makes them managers?”

“‘Dedicated’ can mean a lot of things to a lot of people, Mr. Costello. What got people to this table meant they were able enough and hardworking enough to do what has to be done for our clients. What you see at this table are people with at least 12 years’ experience, with an average of about 20.

“But that’s only half the story. The other half is nobody here works less than 50 to 60 hours a week.”

Allison’s face had an almost dreamy kind of satisfaction at what she was saying. “Ever.” The last word sounded like a mantra.

“You’ll see why as we go over the agenda.”

She turned slightly to direct her comments to her staff. “The first item is shift coverage. With the recent turnover among line staff and social workers this month, we are short on coverage. So Regina will speak on her latest plans. Second is the anticipated budgetary shortfall given cuts in after-care funding. Gilsea and Ashira will speak on what we’ve been working on. That item will take awhile, so be prepared! Third is what we can do to shorten the length of stay of our homeless families. The city wants a faster turnaround time. They threatened funding losses if we don’t comply. So . . .”

“The city drives me crazy,” Gwendolyn interrupted. “How can we stay on top of families when I can’t fill social service job slots and my home finder staff has to do service plans rather than search for apartments?”

The shelter director was clearly frustrated.

“That’s part of what we have to problem-solve today. Like last year, handling staff shortages and budget deficits is this year’s ‘name of the game.’ And we’ve got to play it, no matter what, if we’re going to stay in business.”

Allison ran the group with a manner that reminded Nick of his days in the military. Noting her clarity and confidence as she spoke, he could tell that this was a woman who got things done.

“Finally, operations. Matt briefed Regina and me on . . .”

“Ms. Smith! Ms. Courtney! We got a crisis at the front desk!”

The young receptionist had run into the meeting room, clearly frightened. The magazine was still in her hand. “There’s this family yelling, and then Mr. Jones, that patient who you said had trouble with his meds, he . . .”

Bent slightly at the waist, the young woman was starting to hyperventilate.

Allison and Regina quickly stood up and headed out of the room, the site director putting a comforting arm around the trembling woman’s shoulders as she walked her back to the reception area. “Hold the fort, people!” Allison called back. “This will take a little while. Let’s start again in a half-hour!”

“Half-hour? I wish!”

Nick heard Matt’s grumbling from across the table. Just then the beeper attached to his belt went off. The operations director quickly checked the number. “See you soon, Mr. Costello. Gotta check on my guys over in maintenance.”

Pulling one of the three pens from his shirt pocket as he sped toward the door, he turned and waved Nick toward him. “You can tag along if you want. Allison will beep me when we start. You won’t learn much sitting around here.”

Nick was happy to walk over with Matt, even if he did wear a purple tie. His friendly, no-nonsense manner seemed typical of how people operated around here. Maybe he was seeing a nonprofit management difference at last.

As it would turn out, Nick had seen a glimmer of much that he would be writing about. It was, he would be surprised to learn, a glimmer of something altogether different from gold.

Critical Thinking

What seems to be the leadership’s approach to crisis management? Is there another way in which Allison and Regina could have responded to the receptionist?