

Chapter 1. The email.

“Dear Anna,

I am sad to tell you that I have decided to leave Nuttinghams. My notice period is 3 months so I will be leaving on 11th October.

Despite having many happy times at Nuttinghams over the last few years, and working with some amazing colleagues, it’s become impossible to ignore the fact that many of our working practices are unhealthy and dangerous for the company.

For example:

1. Barry, or one of his sales team, promises the world to our suppliers and customers without consulting us (i.e. the people who will actually be building the product or service)
2. We are then either given a document that prescribes in detail what the sales person wants us to produce or we are given no information and have to chase the sales team to find out what the hell they mean
3. The sales team claims that the request has come from real-life customers, but we know that many of the requests come from third parties, or the sales team has just thought them up
4. Therefore, we are building the service or product in hope that our customers will actually use it without any evidence of that being true
5. The rest of the business is command-and-control, giving none of the teams who are actually building the products or services any input into what it is they are doing
6. We are not allowed contact with our customers or even third parties
7. We are always told what to build, never why. The goal seems to be to build a product or service rather than benefit Nuttinghams or our customers in some measurable way
8. We are rarely asked how long it will take, how much it will cost or who is needed to create the product or service; someone else usually gives a commitment on our behalf. On the rare occasions that we are consulted, our estimates are negotiated, reduced or completely ignored
9. We are reprimanded when we “finish late” (even though we didn’t provide the timescale that someone else committed us to and/or something outside our control has caused a delay)
10. The product or service only goes live once everything is finished and it has been polished to perfection, but we then receive requests to change elements that “haven’t worked” (i.e. someone told us to build the wrong thing)
11. We never hear if the product or service actually makes money or is well-received by our customers

12. Nobody is held accountable for the requested service or product, which just encourages people to continue sending us spurious requests.

I appreciate that Nuttinghams, like all department stores, is going through difficult times, but management's idea to offshore the IT teams won't suddenly make everything better; it will just move the broken communications to another team in another country.

However, if we address the issues above, I believe Nuttinghams will be in a better position to survive these turbulent times. Unfortunately, I don't have the confidence that anything will change because the management team has so far ignored all our attempts to improve this position. For this reason, I have decided to leave.

I wish you and Nuttinghams the best for the future.

Regards,

Charlie Blades"

Chapter 2. A seed of discontent.

It's unlikely that I would ever have the guts to send such an explicit and detailed resignation; a more traditional, succinct message that doesn't burn any bridges is much safer.

But it is reassuring to get my rant written down because it verifies that there are serious issues with the job. For a moment, I thought *I* was the problem.

It all started this morning with a rather unsettling experience in my dentist's waiting room. Having recently turned forty, I was drawn to the front cover of a magazine which asked 'Are you having a mid-life crisis?'

Determined to prove to the publication that my answer was a resounding 'no', I picked it up and quietly completed their twenty-question survey.

As expected, it confirmed that I was doing well in many areas.

I got nearly full marks in the basic 'physiological needs' section which covered food and water, shelter, sleep, sex. Although, upon reflection, I had to admit that I slightly exaggerated my answers regarding the last two.

'Safety needs' also returned a good score. I am in good health and have personal, emotional and financial security according to the test.

My 'social belonging' score was lower, but just in the green. I have a loving family as well as a good network of friends and colleagues, but it suggested that I wasn't as 'contemporary and cool' as I might like.

The problems really started when I got to the 'acceptance' section. 'Everyone wants to be accepted and valued by others,' it wrote, 'but you may have unfulfilled needs in terms of recognition, respect from others and self-esteem.'

I threw the magazine back on the table, complaining that it was just a rag and the test was not supported by science.

But, while recumbent at the dentist's mercy, I couldn't help but ponder the results.

The world I grew up in was certainly different. It was a time when things were ace and mega. Being *friends* with someone meant that you rode around on BMXs together. And on-demand music was obtained through a combination of the weekly Top 40 chart show, a cassette recorder and very nimble fingers that allowed you to slice out the disc jockey's voice to within a millisecond.

I may not be cool, but I'm okay with that. The line between being cool and being an embarrassing nob-head gets finer the older you get. I recently heard a BBC Radio One DJ in his fifties refer to his 'street cats' in an acceptance speech with no hint of whimsy. He did not grow up in 1980s Harlem, but the quaint and genteel town of Chichester in West Sussex. Not being cool is okay with me.

However, a seed of discontent had been sown.

I had loved my job as manager of online sales of women's fashion at Nuttinghams. It was one of the UK's most loved department stores; the work was interesting and the team talented. We'd had lots of fun too.

But things had changed in recent months and it reached a crescendo last week when Nuttinghams publicly announced a rescue package that included closing stores and reducing the number of product lines.

What it didn't announce was the aim to increase margins and cut costs where possible.

I understand that improvements need to be made in order to save Nuttinghams, but some of the proposed changes make no sense. That's what I object to. And I'm not alone. The rest of the online team thinks that many of the management's demands are ludicrous too. In fact, nobody outside the management team has confidence in them; they're just polishing each other's egos and convincing themselves they know what they're doing. In reality, they are stabbing in the dark and each one is just trying to protect their job.

One of the worst offenders is a chump called Barry Daniels, Director of Sales.

Barry has a degree in covering his own arse and a post-graduate in spin. He can make a disaster – most likely unnecessarily caused by his team – sound like a success. Of course the people on the ground know that it's all nonsense, but it means he gets to live another day.

His team lacks order and they frequently flip-flop from one thing to the next without reason or sense. Their actions give the place as much order as the Wild West. And Barry thinks he's the Sheriff.

Barry must be six foot two and approaching two hundred and fifty pounds. His affection for pin stripe suits doesn't make him any more endearing. And all of this is topped by an annoyingly smug grin.

With people like Barry Daniels pulling Nuttinghams' strings, there is no hope.

So my resignation letter is not being written lightly. I love working at Nuttinghams; I just can't see a future here anymore. Best to get out ahead of everyone else.

I save the email to my drafts, promising myself that I'll take a fresh look at it tomorrow before sending it to HR.

As I walk out into the late summer night, I feel a sense of relief for having made the decision to leave. In my mind, it's the start of the end for my time at Nuttinghams.

What I don't know is that no resignation email will be sent.

I have no idea what is about to happen.

Chapter 3. The lemonade stall.

I spend the entire journey home wondering how Jess will take my decision to leave Nuttinghams. Although she'll give me the option to talk at length about it, my mind is exhausted from going over the events time after time. I just want to relax for the evening.

As I near my house, I see Jess standing in the road talking to our neighbour. The kids are engrossed in a game on the pavement.

'Hi Charlie,' Jess and our next door neighbour, Sarah, greet me in unison after I've parked.

'Hi Daddy,' my girls start shouting after their attention has been interrupted by the announcement that I'm home.

They take turns jumping into my arms for a cuddle. Penelope first, then Emily. It's something they've been doing since they were toddlers. Emily, at six years old, is just about manageable unless she puts all her weight onto me by lifting her feet off the ground. Pen, at nine, is more like a steam train hitting me. But, regardless, I encourage it because I know that our cute tradition won't last forever; before I know it they'll be surly teenagers.

Jess and Sarah smile, then grimace.

'The girls want to have a lemonade stall for the village run next weekend,' they announce.

'Oh, that's nice,' I respond, returning the grimace. 'I'm sure you'll all have a lovely time. I think I've got ... er ... something on that day. When is it?' I joke.

Pen and Scarlett, Sarah's daughter, start to lay out their plans. 'We were talking about whether we should consider selling *proper* lemonade this time though.'

A few weeks previously, Pen had fleeced £1 from Sarah for a glass of lemon-infused water. I'd suggested that, next time, she might create *proper* lemonade and had even shown them how simple the recipe was on the BBC Food website.

Their goal is a simple one: earn sufficient money to buy a new toy each. I already know which toy Pen and Emily want as it has been referred to a few times recently. The big question the girls are considering is whether the adults know what they are talking about regarding the need for a more complicated product or whether fruit-infused water is a better business idea. The latter would certainly be a lot easier for everyone involved.

'How do you *know* that your proper lemonade is better than our lemonade, Daddy?' they turn to me, a bit too hostile for my liking.

'Well, it's what *I'd* want,' I reply.

'But you're not running the race, are you Daddy?' Pen enquires as a genuine question.

'No, I'm not,' I confirm.

I'm about to start explaining why runners wouldn't want fruit-infused water but then think that they'd probably not want sugary lemonade either.

'Do we know anyone actually running in the race?' Emily asks.

'Vinod round the corner is running, I think,' helps Jess.

'Can we go and speak to him, Daddy? Pleeeeeaaase,' beg the kids.

I'm too tired to try and resist.

'Sure.'

We knock on our neighbour's door and thankfully he answers. My children are persistent. We often liken them to The Terminator in their approach to questioning because they won't stop until they have an answer. If Vinod hadn't been in, we would have been knocking on every door in the neighbourhood until we had found someone.

After explaining our dilemma, of whether proper lemonade or fruit-infused water would be preferable to runners, he looks a bit uncomfortable.

'I'm afraid runners would bring their own drinks normally. And they'd bring food too. Nowadays we have special re-hydration drinks and energy bars.'

Vinod roots around in a rucksack and pulls out a small tube.

'This is an isotonic gel which is easily digestible and gives me a quick hit of carbs for immediate energy.'

The girls look crest-fallen. Their business idea has just crashed and burned, and the prospect of a new doll has disappeared with it.

Vinod's wife, Joshna, joins us. 'Evening everyone. What's going on?'

We explain the original plan and the dashing news.

'Well,' she clarifies, 'of course water should be what they're drinking most of the time.'

Joshna is a doctor at the hospital in nearby Oxford and delivers this message to Vinod with a hint of reprimand.

'Vinod is obsessed with these gels and bars, so I have to encourage him to come back to nature sometimes and drink water more than he'd like to.'

Vinod rolls his eyes.

'I tell you what you girls could think about though,' she offers, 'something for the poor people like me. We stand outside for hours to cheer our loved ones on, in whatever weather this country decides to throw at us on the day.'

Smiles start to return to the children's faces as they sense a glimmer of hope. They encourage Joshna to continue.

'There's nothing supplied for the crowds of onlookers like me. The runners go around the village a few times and it's pretty boring,' Joshna laughs, flicking Vinod a loving smile.

Joshna then waggles her finger like a light bulb has just gone off in her head.

‘And you know what, girls? It’s not just food and drink, it’s something to sit on like a blanket, umbrellas in case it rains, something to read or some sort of entertainment.’

‘Sounds like a business empire,’ I tease.

‘Why don’t you just take these things with you?’ Scarlett asks.

Joshna looks at Vinod as if to announce that she’s going to reveal a dark secret. ‘When getting ready for a big race, Vinod gets... I mean some runners get a little bit stressy. So their partners are usually focusing on just getting them out of the door with everything they need, rather than worrying about themselves. Then you find yourself stuck without anything and you dare not go home in case you miss them running by.’

‘What kind of food or drink would you like,’ Emily asks. ‘Lemonade? Lollies? Marshmallows?’

How kids view the world is gorgeous sometimes: no thoughts about any food with a shred of nutritional value in it.

‘Lollies are good if it turns out hot, although I once took a lolly with me and it melted all over the inside of my bag. I’m not sure about the marshmallows,’ Joshna humours the girls before adding some other suggestions. ‘A cold drink would be nice for the summertime runs. And a cup of tea for the rest of the year. It can get quite cold towards the end because you’re not moving around much. And a biscuit or piece of cake would be good too. I’m not very lucky with them either: I usually end up having to vacuum my bag the next day to remove crushed biscuits and cake crumbs.’

Joshna looks at her watch. ‘I’m sorry girls, I’d be happy to talk more about this, but we’ve got to go and pick Jatin up from football. Feel free to come and knock on the door again if you think we can help further.’

Chapter 4. The revelation.

Jess and Sarah have already planned a TV dinner for the girls at Sarah's house. Three glasses of red wine get poured once we are inside.

Moving from London just over ten years ago, I had dreamed of becoming part of a community like this, where impromptu gatherings would happen and people could just drop in on each other.

When our kids go to Sarah's house, our youngest child normally heads straight for the toys, whilst the two older girls run upstairs to Scarlett's room. This time all three of the girls are sitting at Sarah's dining room table with a stack of paper and pens. They are in full planning mode.

In the time it took us to walk round the corner from Joshna and Vinod's house, the children had stiffed us for ten pounds to buy ingredients. They negotiated hard. Had we not felt that there was a lesson in business happening, they'd not have raised nearly as much. But, if they need any more funding, we have told them that they will have to use their pocket money. At least we managed to limit our level of investment.

'What about ice cubes with something in them? Like a blueberry,' suggests Emily.

Scarlett nods her head approvingly. 'Great idea.'

Emily, relishing in the approval from her big girl neighbour, pushes on with other ideas. 'What about orange squash lollies?'

The other girls join in, generating a pile of ideas between them.

'Or blackcurrant lollies?'

'We have flasks for cold drinks or tea. That could help keep people cool or warm like Joshna suggested.'

'And Joshna suggested biscuits and cake. What about flapjack? That's pretty simple to make.'

'Or some fork biscuits? We made those with Grandad when we visited him. They were easy too.'

'And what about the umbrellas and blankets?'

We've been listening from Sarah's kitchen. It's lovely to hear the three of them working together.

Then it all goes quiet. When children go quiet, you always know that something is wrong.

Sarah goes into them. 'How's it going, girls?' she asks them, knowing that Planning Central has hit a snag.

'There's quite a lot of options,' says Pen with a hint of despair in her voice.

It's the first reality check they've had since we got back.

'How do we know which ones to do?'

‘Well, what is your business all about, girls?’ Sarah encourages, without emphasising the word *business* in a way that would belittle or patronise.

‘Food and drink,’ the children say in unison.

‘But there are still lots of different types of foods we could make,’ highlights Scarlett. ‘What if we make trays of flapjack, cakes and lollies, but nobody wants them?’

‘Well, when I’m at work, we test out new ideas with customers before we even start to build a product,’ Sarah calmly explains. ‘That way, we get feedback on various possible solutions to help us work out which ones might be more successful than others.’

The girls have a new release of energy. ‘And Joshna said that she’d be happy for us to knock on her door,’ shouts Scarlett.

‘Can we have some cookery books please Sarah?’ asks Pen.

Sarah walks back in, grabs a selection of books, delivers them to the girls, then walks back in to top up our glasses.

‘That’ll keep them busy over the weekend,’ she laughs.

I suddenly realise that the kids are approaching their fun run stall in a better way than we approach our projects at work. Three girls under ten years old have just planned their ten pound budget idea with more aplomb than we plan projects costing tens of thousands.

As Sarah and Jess discuss an impending school trip, I start to summarise in my head what’s just happened.

First, they identified a problem: there is a village fun run coming up and, in previous years, there’s not been any supply of food or drink.

Secondly, they identified who the real *customers* are. Importantly, they established that the runners were probably not as important as they thought and identified a previously unknown market of spectators.

Thirdly, they clarified the customers’ needs, based on the problems these customers had experienced in the past: keeping warm, cool, dry, entertained, fed and watered.

Then they worked with their customers to find possible solutions, often based on what their customers had done before to try to solve the problem themselves. This resulted in more solutions than they could deliver, but they weren’t limiting themselves at this point.

The next step is to start creating a few trial products on a small scale, testing them on real customers to see which ones are popular and therefore more likely to succeed.

Finally, they will appraise the situation. They can discard poor solutions and improve the ones that look like they have potential.

What else did I learn?

Don't assume you know what people want; your customers aren't necessarily like you or your friends. You can't just build a service or product around what *you* think works.

Also, they benefitted from getting people involved early on: neighbours and their parents. They got investment easily because of that too.

What was it that Scarlett said at one point? Something about it not being perfect. Oh, yes, she said, 'Even if it's not perfect this year, we will learn how to improve it for next time.'

Smart kids.

It's always tempting to stay out when you're having a good time with friends, the wine is flowing and you're close to home. So by the time we get home and pour our exhausted children into their beds, it's late. Far later than is sensible for them to go to bed. They'll be hard work tomorrow.

Despite this, I'm buzzing. Part of that's a result of the amount of wine I drank next door, but mostly it's from the new ideas that are flying around my head.

Could this approach work at Nuttinghams?

I start scribbling down notes about this evening's learnings.

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