

OH SUSANA!

*Surviving the Corporate Trenches while
Dodging the Layoff Landmines.*

Volume 1 ~ Mind Game Boot Camp



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Blog: RANDOM RAMBLINGS

~ Mind Game Boot Camp ~

While unemployed in The City Beautiful during 2009, I accepted a one-month Contract Senior Technical Writer position at a downtown Orlando manufacturing company, a creator of RFID-tagged, all-plastic pallets. The owners had started the company after quitting their jobs at their biggest competitor, the largest wood pallet pooling company in the world.

The company manuals that I read for the first two weeks on the job advertised the firm's beginnings and purpose. Launched in March 2006, the company seemed cutting-edge and exciting! After all, the company boasted the world's first pallet rental service providing shippers and receivers with all-plastic pallets with embedded RFID tags. The pallets were 30 percent lighter than wood, which saved on transport costs and helped reduce green house gases. The plastic pallets were also more hygienic and easier to handle than wood pallets. Because they eliminated protruding nails and splinters, they reduced the risk of workplace injuries and damaged equipment. The embedded RFID tags also enabled shippers and receivers to track and trace shipments. Because the pallets were 100 percent recyclable, the firm boasted the creation of thousands of new green jobs for the U.S.A!

While this company had a good product with amazing business potential, its culture was less than desirable. The management also enjoyed recycling Contractors as part of its GREEN Job mission. While Contractors are often treated like second-class citizens in the workplace, during the Layoff Years starting in 2008, this company took advantage of the thousands of unemployed by hiring them on as Contractors and then "playing with them" like a cat plays with its captive prey.

A woman who braved the humiliations and was eventually hired on as a Permanent Test Team employee warned, "Be prepared to be tested beyond your wildest dreams."

She should have said "nightmares."





Each day, I was not only given a different place to sit, but some days it was merely a chair, other days, a desk.

While I'd experienced this type of chaos at other firms -- (I'd once contracted for a banking software company as a Technical Translator where they gave me a yellow pad and pencil for three days, and then sat me in a different room for the first two weeks, sometimes at a desk with a Mac, other times at a desk with a PC, until a cubicle near the Translation team became available)-- at this job, when I was finally assigned to a desk, it was moved from day-to-day, from room-to-room, including the hallway, so that each morning I had to hunt my desk down.

As I left each evening, I tried to anticipate the next day's seating arrangement.

Where would my desk be in the morning? The elevator? The sidewalk? The supply closet? The basement?

One day, I had the foresight to arrive an hour before my start time.

It was then that I encountered three 20-something "managers" giggling as they shoved my desk into the hall and realized the chaos wasn't due to the company's disorganization, but to its method of testing the fortitude of its newly-hired Contractors.



As I followed the managers pushing my desk and chair to the elevator, and then to the top floor, I realized the benefit of an earlier start time meant I saved time hunting down my desk. But, that realization was soon followed by the thought that the search actually gave me something to do each day besides reading the company manuals. The first two 7-day weeks of my one-month contract (for which I was paid \$35 per hour) were spent reading the company manuals as an example of the work I would create, and of course, hunting down my desk.

Do the Math, and then multiply that total by three, to cover the other two Contract Technical Writers hired the same day, who were also reading manuals and hunting down their desks, and then figure out why this company was spending so much money to hire folks to be unproductive. There were writers hired two weeks earlier who had experienced the same "welcome" to the company. Were we write-offs? Were they money-laundering? Were they planning on keeping the lone survivor? What was the purpose of these games? I never knew.

At 5:00 PM one Thursday evening, the Contract Technical Writers were ordered to stay "as late as it took" to help the Test Team meet a deadline. Some folks said they needed more notice, as they had to meet their car pool, pick up kids, etc. They were immediately terminated. (I called my ex-husband for emergency child pick-up duty, and luckily, he agreed.) That evening at work, we stood peering over the Test Team's shoulders as they worked. After all, we had no computers. At 9:30 PM, our Manager thanked us for staying late and sent us home.

At the start of the third week, which was hard to tell after working 14 straight days, I was assigned two projects that were due ASAP: a use case and a quick reference software user guide. Finally! REAL WORK. But, while I had been given a monitor and keyboard for my desk, I was missing the computer/CPU/workstation, so I couldn't do the assignment, and there weren't pencils, pens, or notepads from Supply available for Contractors.

Luckily, on this day, my desk happened to be in close range to co-workers who whispered that I needed to order the computer at the front desk, so I did. However, it did not stop my manager from yelling about my lack of productivity. It had been an hour since I'd been given the assignments, and I had not yet begun writing. The fact that I had no computer didn't matter. Had I even begun to document in my head? It was amazing to watch a man yell for so long without taking a breath. It was also amazing that his histrionics were not a preamble to termination.



We were once advised to not bring lunch the next day, as it would be provided during a meeting. Our manager earnestly took our pizza orders, inviting us to specify vegetarian or meat toppings, thin crust or deep dish, white sauce or red. Smacking his lips, he promised it would be the best pizza we ever tasted.

He also described this new, downtown, family-owned restaurant with great relish. When asked if the restaurant was located within walking

distance, he nodded and vaguely gestured in the direction of Lake Eola, which was across the street.



Deviating from his usual formal manner, he chatted with us, describing with gusto the exquisite spices and cheeses and the equally tantalizing crust we would be sampling. He even suggested the best toppings to order. We each told him we looked forward to the meeting *and* the pizza. Several of the writers, who no longer ate pizza for dietary reasons, decided to skip breakfast the next morning so they could partake of the lunch.

He seemed especially pleased with this news.

Prior to the luncheon meeting, the receptionist passed out paper plates, napkins, and plastic picnic ware in anticipation of our meal.

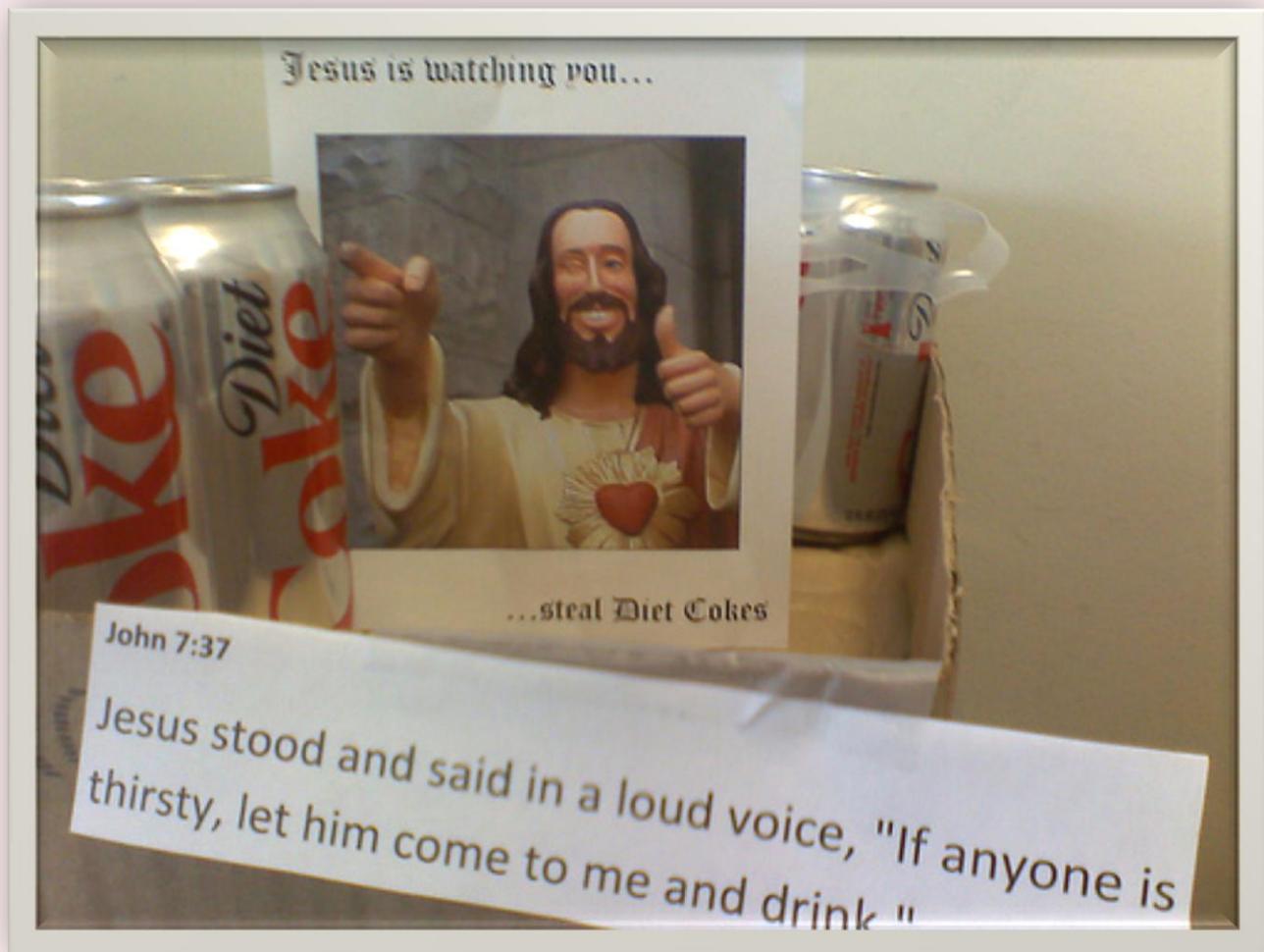


During the meeting, the president/owner of the company droned on about the history of the company and the fine details of the product, while he showed both a PowerPoint slide presentation *and* a video that duplicated everything we'd been reading in the manuals for two weeks, while our loud, growling stomachs nearly drowned out his voice.

At the conclusion of the 90-minute meeting, our manager gleefully shouted, "Oh well! I guess the pizzas didn't arrive. Get back to work!"

As the dazed and starving employees lunged at the vending machines, the company Accountant stood watch, arms crossed, and snapped at us through clenched teeth about how the company previously provided free sodas until everyone started stealing them.





There were additional "tests," but memory wisely fails. My prayers were answered when I was offered a job closer to home in Research Park.

But, right before I gave notice, I asked for time off for a scheduled dentist appointment and was immediately terminated, despite their being pleased with the manuals I'd written after finally getting access to a computer.

Fortunately, I was more than ready to give notice, but I couldn't help thinking about how much I'd sacrificed in terms of time spent away from my family, friends, and pets during the seven-day work-week, where I often stayed late into the evening at a moment's notice to basically do nothing but stay late, while wasting my skills and enduring the humiliating and unjustified manager melt-downs...all for a paycheck.



I exchanged war stories with a fellow "one-month" Contract Technical Writer who had survived five months at this firm. Steve found me on LinkedIn.com. His planned vacation had been approved during the interview, yet he'd been fired upon return for "taking time off from the office." It was UNPAID time off, to boot, as he was merely a Contractor and so received no company benefits. I think Steve put it best when he said it was as if we'd been hired due to some kind of mandate, but they didn't really want us there. It was the most unwelcome either of us had ever felt at a job. Steve should know about hostile environments, too, having served in Afghanistan as an active Marine.

Although we'd both experienced similar incidents in Department of Defense jobs, this firm took the cake for being the only commercial company with the Indoctrination Method I like to call Mind Game Boot Camp.

Having survived several assignments for the Department of Defense, I am certain at least one of the owners of this place was a retired military man, or at least the son of an old-school, retired military man -- typically a Drill Sergeant, or Drill Sergeant wanna-be.

In all, I survived six weeks of the "one-month" contract before jumping ship. It was one of the most stressful, interesting, educational, humorous (in hindsight) and even work-free positions of my technical writing career stint as a Contractor.

Unfortunately, my subsequent Contract assignment was for the Department of Defense.

Stay tuned for THOSE war stories at www.writewaydesigns.com/ramblings.php located at a browser near you.