

A Moment of Realization

It was the evening of the annual 'Leaders of Tomorrow' awards dinner. A glittering black-tie affair held at The Dorchester hotel, London, attended by over 2000 employees gathered from Gant Foster's European offices. There were representatives from all levels of the business, including board members and non-executive directors, many of whom William Cleverley, the company's Operations Director, looked up to and whose admiration he sought.

William had been asked to present an award. It was his big chance, an opportunity to shine but the importance of the event was making him unusually nervous, as he adjusted his bow-tie for the umpteenth time. This was one of the most prestigious events in the Gant Foster annual calendar and until now William had simply been too busy to give it due attention. It was only yesterday that he'd so much as thought about what to say and had haphazardly drawn up his speech. He was now just moments away from being called to the stage.

William fidgeted in his seat, as Melissa Jacobs, the European Marketing Director, presented the award for the most Innovative

Advertising Idea. His category for the Rising Star Award was up next. He sighed a long breath of desperation.

Watching Melissa, he marvelled at how clearly she spoke, concisely explaining the history of the award and acknowledging all the entrants for their brilliant ideas. ‘Well it’s been an incredibly close call, but I am delighted to announce that tonight’s winner is Susan Dillon, for her highly visual and engaging campaign, as celebrated in so many industry publications already this year.’

William’s face turned ashen white as Melissa eloquently described why Susan was such a worthy winner, placing great emphasis on her achievements and why she was so proud of Susan and her team. What’s more, she had already brilliantly summarised the strengths of each shortlisted entrant. Not a single member of the audience could be in any doubt that Melissa cared about her nominees ... she’d focused her speech entirely on them.

William, on the other hand, was about to do the opposite. Caught up in his own self-importance, he’d planned to share his personal success story to show the winner what they might expect as a result of their triumph. What on earth had he been thinking? How could he so foolishly have overlooked that the event was about recognizing the award nominees for their successes and achievements rather than his own rise to glory through the company? It was thinly veiled self-promotion at best, and he feared this could really backfire on him. He’d been so wrapped up with concerns about his own public image and how to use this precious opportunity to make an impression, that he’d quite forgotten himself and was

behaving like a total idiot. Why did he think his story mattered anyway? Did he really crave recognition that desperately?

Beads of sweat formed on his temple and he wished he'd done more preparation, but it was too late for that now. He tried to reassure himself that as this wasn't the first speech he'd given, everything would surely be okay? Of course it would ... he'd be fine and the words would flow naturally. His anxiety had grown a little during the extravagant dinner – the long wait until his scheduled slot had given him far too much time to dwell, and now, having heard Melissa, he was taking deep breaths to calm the tension building inside him. All he wanted was to get out there and get the whole thing over with.

As Eric, a Senior Vice President at Gant Foster and William's seemingly hard-to-please boss, was welcomed back on stage, William realized that the time had come for him to stand in front of 2000 people to present the award. What the hell was he going to do now? He hadn't researched any of the nominees and didn't have a clue what to say. He was resigned to thinking that nothing good could come of this, and that he was about to make a complete fool of himself. He'd well and truly blown it, his career and reputation were surely on the line.

Eric paused, looked up from behind the lectern, and in a clear and authoritative voice made his announcement: 'Ladies and gentlemen, it's now time for the Rising Star Award, and to make the presentation would you please give a warm welcome to our Operations Director, William Cleverley!'

Applause filled the room as William rose from his seat. It was only a short distance to the stage, but he was amazed at the stream of destructive thoughts racing through his mind as he walked up the steps towards Eric. How on earth was he going to pull this off and salvage his dignity? Riding the feeling of anxiety in his chest, he took another deep breath to ease the palpitations. If only he could wake up and discover this was just a bad dream.

William shook Eric's hand and turned to face the expectant audience, but before he had a chance to lean forward towards the microphone, Eric squeezed in front of him and began speaking again. 'Ladies and gentlemen, to me William is a role model employee and I had no hesitation in giving him the honour of presenting this award. As a former winner in this category you can be sure he knows exactly what it takes to succeed at Gant Foster. Please give him another big round of applause!' William cringed. Eric's spontaneous address had put him so high on the company pedestal that he could surely only plummet from here. If he'd only known before why Eric had chosen him for this honour he'd have realized those reasons alone gave him the recognition he desired. He hardly needed to make some lofty speech to big himself up, Eric had more than adequately fluffed his peacock feathers, and ironically – for once he wished he hadn't.

A nervous smile flickered across William's face as he loosened his collar and reached for the gold envelope. The bright spotlights picked out the redness in his cheeks as he self-consciously wiped his clammy palms down the sides of each trouser leg.

‘Good evening, it’s a wonderful privilege to be here,’ spluttered William, unconvincingly. He forced a smile, wishing he were invisible. His mind had frozen. Totally blank, he stared out at the expectant sea of faces as a flash of panic surged in his chest. Deliberately fixing his stare above the audience’s heads, he waited for the words to come...but nothing came. He could feel his body starting to tremble. And then he spoke, just blurting out whatever words came and hoping for the best. ‘I know how hard you ... that is the shortlisted finalists, err ... must have worked to, err, get this far.’ William’s mind seized up again.

‘Err, I’m certain there are some outstanding candidates,’ he blustered. All the names on the nomination list completely escaped him. He was totally lost for words. The audience fixed their gaze on him and at that precise moment William felt like he was lined up to face a 2000-strong firing squad. Eric could barely watch as William went from bad to worse.

How much more embarrassing could this get, wondered Eric? Why hasn’t he rehearsed? Heck, how would it reflect on him now after his big introduction? ‘Just open the envelope,’ he snapped brusquely.

William nodded, quickly tearing at the thin paper to unveil the card within. ‘Please put your hands together for an excellent guy, Jason Goodman,’ he announced the winner, failing to hide the tremble in his voice. It was clear he’d blatantly overlooked what Jason had actually done to merit the award.

William stood dumbfounded on the front of the stage, frantically searching for the right words to say next. But his mind had deserted him, crashed. Nowhere to go. 'F***ck!' his whole being cried inside. And he just stood there, grinning inanely at the audience for what felt like an inordinately long time. He felt a rush of dizziness, his eyes glazed over and the whole room became a complete blur.

Eric assumed control and beckoned Jason over to give his acceptance speech. He was eager to make it as seamless as possible and save William any further embarrassment ... he was, after all, a key member of his team. And he could always find out why things had gone so wrong later. William hurried off to the wings where his good friend Steve was waiting, his face wrought with concern.

'What happened William?' he asked, trying not to sound too overtly concerned. 'That's not like you. Is everything okay?'

'Not now thanks Steve,' William retorted, raising his hand. 'I need to be alone.'

Head down, William marched purposefully towards the toilets. He heard his name called out more than once, but he just ignored it and hurried on into the Gents, eager to avoid any interactions.

Standing over the washbasin, he wondered what he could possibly say to explain his behaviour. He threw more cold water over his face, wiped it dry and stood staring at his pitiful reflection

in the mirror. He barely recognized the wretch that stared back at him, eyes full of fear and black bags ringing his eyes. 'You complete and utter buffoon,' he cursed, hammering the hand-dryer with his fist and wincing at the pain that flared in his knuckles.

William headed surreptitiously for the bar. Ordering a double whiskey, he raised the glass in his trembling hand and quickly downed the drink in one, signalling for the barman to pour him another. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

'William,' said Steve, as William turned to face him. 'Are you okay buddy? What happened out there?'

William was still trembling. 'I don't know Steve. I just lost it, I guess. I feel terrible for Jason, and furious with myself for letting Eric down like that. Not to mention making a total fool of myself! I've really messed up big time here Steve,' William sighed. 'I'm going home.' He slugged back the second whiskey and slamming the glass down on the bar, he started to walk away.

'Hey hey, not so fast.' Steve placed a reassuring hand on William's shoulder. 'Just wait here a moment, you're in no fit state to go anywhere just yet. Now just breathe. That's it. And again ...'

After a few minutes, William appeared to be a little calmer. 'Steve, I've been such an idiot. I've messed up good and proper this time ... I don't know what happened back there. I feel like I'm losing the plot.'

'It's okay,' Steve assured him. 'You're exhausted and completely stressed out! You've been pushing yourself too hard, for too long – something had to give. Maybe this is a blessing in disguise ... an opportunity for you to stop and take stock of what's happening? Unless, of course, you're happy to be heading for burnout or something much worse? Trust me, I recognize the signs well ... The choice is yours.'

'I'm not sure I know what you're talking about Steve. And as for choice, I'm not so sure I have got one, besides – Eric's surely going to want to fire me, right?' William sighed trying to relieve the tightness in his chest. 'My career could be in ruins and my life feels totally out of control. I feel like I have gone right over the edge and this is the final straw!'

'You always have a choice, William. It may not feel like it, but you ALWAYS have a choice. It doesn't have to be this way.'

Steve apologized for sounding harsh, but it was for William's own good. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind no matter what, especially when someone's health could be at stake.

Steve knew this all too well. He was the Product Development Director at Gant Foster and had been back at work for just three months after suffering a heart attack last year. This had been a huge shock to everyone in the company when it happened, after all Steve was only 44 at the time (three years younger than William was now) and had seemed so in control. Nothing ever appeared to faze

him on the surface and he was always the one to pull the team through with a smile on his face, whatever the circumstances.

William sighed again. 'You know what Steve – work and tonight's monumental cock up aside, I've been a terrible husband to Rebecca lately, and no better a father to the kids. I haven't made time for Rebecca, for us, and I think my kids are just paying me lip service these days. And I even missed Tom's concert last week and he had a solo piano part! I just completely forgot about it and then I was out of favour with everyone at home – and quite rightly so. I'm missing out on my children growing up – and for what exactly? Where the hell did I go so wrong? I feel like no one seems to understand me any more, least of all myself. My head has been so far up my own backside that I seem to have totally lost all perspective.'

'Well maybe you're having a wake up call and it's simply time to make some changes. But right now, let's get you home. Come on, I'll drive you.'

'You can't drive, you've had too much to drink'

'I was drinking sparkling water all evening. I've changed a lot of my habits and daily practices. Having a heart attack does that for you ... let's hope you don't get to that stage.'

Feeling a shooting pain in his chest, William wondered if a heart attack wasn't too much of a distant possibility for him, right here and now.

‘Keep breathing, William. Take some deep breaths and don’t say another word,’ said Steve as they pulled away in the car.

William felt numb, but had managed to compose himself a little by the time he returned home to his wife. His chest pains were easing, thankfully, but he remembered an inner feeling he’d simply dismissed ... an inner feeling of foreboding, a warning that he was heading for trouble. He couldn’t carry on like this ... if he didn’t stop and make changes, life would do it for him, judging by what Steve was saying, but William could make no sense of anything right now.

‘You’re fortunate it wasn’t a serious health scare that gave you this wake up call,’ said Steve, almost reading William’s mind. ‘And only time will tell if that’s what this is. It took a heart attack to make me stop and think. You have already had the warning signs, now you’ve just been delivered a moment of realization and have a clear choice to make. You can change or you can carry on as before and wait until it’s too late. Please do something about it NOW or your health will get worse – you’re already exhausted. Who knows what this could lead to and then what use will you be to anyone, especially yourself? Life gives us little signs or “nudges” and if we don’t listen to them, it finds a way of making us stop. They don’t even have to be major or dramatic events, it can be the smallest thing that makes us wake up. If we don’t listen to these nudges, to that voice inside of us that somehow seems to know, we do so at our peril. Listen to your gut or intuition as I now call it, William, please!’

Steve realized he was being a little hard-hitting and was unsure if the timing was right for this conversation, but he wanted to really

make William think. They drove the rest of the way in silence, giving William time to reflect. He definitely felt some resistance towards Steve's hippy intuition spiel and yet he couldn't help thinking he might be onto something, somehow it resonated. Perhaps he had been ignoring the signs...perhaps that was where he had gone so wrong.

As William got out of the car, Steve turned to him. 'I know it feels like this is the worst thing in the world right now, but tomorrow you can put this into perspective and see it as a chance to make some positive and obviously overdue changes. And you don't have to do all of this on your own. I am currently working with someone who can perhaps help you too, an executive coach. The work we are doing really is very empowering – there is a different way.' And with that Steve left. He had just wanted to give William some hope amongst all of this upset. He would talk to him again in the next few days when hopefully William had calmed down.

Steve had received his own 'nudges' in the past which he regretted not acting on. He certainly didn't want William to make the same mistake. He was well aware that something, in his case a heart attack, could stop you in your tracks and force you to change. He wished he'd made a choice to change earlier. Still, he was where he was, and he'd learned a lot since then, especially to live in the present with as much gratitude as possible, for all that he had.

At this moment in time he was grateful he could be there for William.

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'It's your choice, William.' Steve's words were ringing in William's ears as he walked towards his luxury cars parked on the drive ahead of him. The buzz of status they had once given him seemed to have faded, no longer filling the emptiness that he felt inside. Still in a daze, he fumbled for his key and opened the front door. Rebecca was still up, sitting in the lounge. As William appeared through the door, she noticed how white he was, the colour completely drained from his face.

Without a word, she opened her arms and gave him a big hug. Rebecca was a wise woman and while she didn't yet know what had happened, she had sensed something brewing for a while. It was clear something was seriously wrong. They could talk later; right now she just wanted to let her husband know he was very dearly loved. As Rebecca wrapped him in her arms, William's body started to tremble again as he struggled to maintain his composure. He clung on rigid, fighting back the urge to cry as he gulped, humiliated. He was surprised to find his body caving in, surrendering. That part of him that always held on tight, holding it all together had lost control. His eyes welled up with tears and he broke down in Rebecca's arms.

'It's okay, darling, it will all be alright – just let it out.' William never cried, he had always been taught to hold his emotion in and put on a brave face, but he felt safe in Rebecca's arms and he couldn't have stopped the tears if he'd tried.

Rebecca gently held William until he was ready to talk. She made them both a cup of tea and settled back on the sofa to listen to what he had to say.