

a novel

ART TREZZO

NARA, a Novel

by

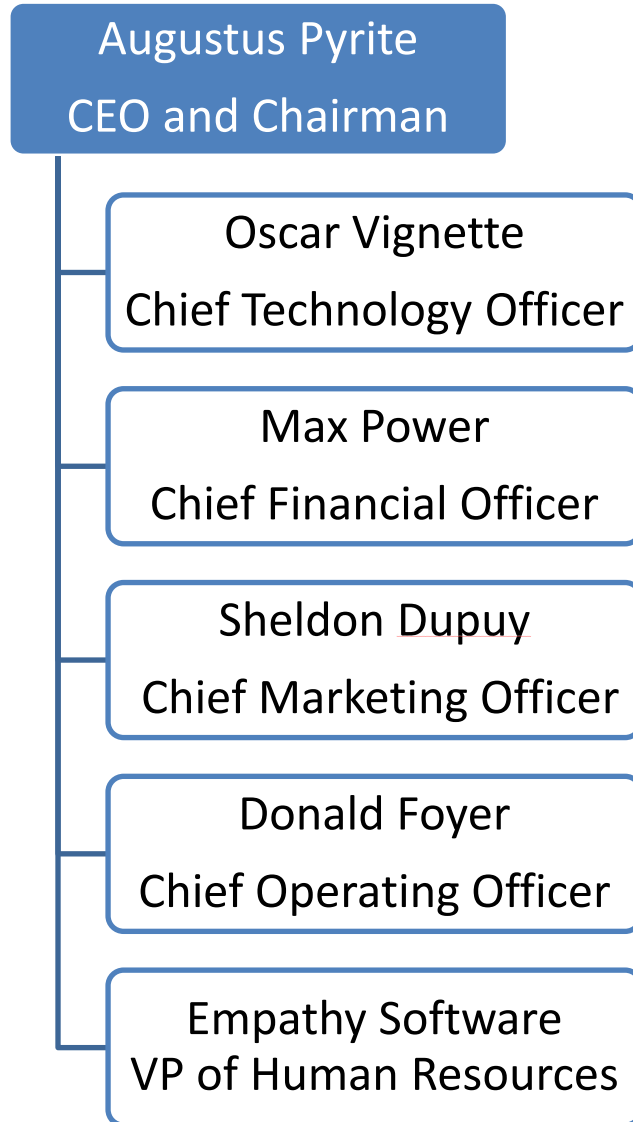
Art Trezzo

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APATE Corporation 

Senior Leadership



Chapter 1

In a cavernous banquet hall, at the annual stockholder meeting of the Apate corporation, CEO Augustus Pyrite (not his birth name) faced an army of reporters, shielded only by a five-thousand-dollar Italian suit, a deep tan, a magnanimous smile, and a blood alcohol level of .12. He leaned forward to the microphone and asked, “What is the next question?”

“What is your response to the recent accusations that your factories utilize child labor?” asked the next reporter, a humorless woman in a business suit.

Augustus leaned forward again. “There is nothing more important to me personally and professionally than human rights, and I share that passion with every member of the board. We regularly conduct inspections of our factories abroad, and I am confident that the internal investigation will show no wrongdoing. If, however, it reveals transgressions, I assure you that there will be consequences.”

The Apate Corporation, a subsidiary of Shoeware International, the coincidental parent of both the American Association for the Advancement of Basketball and the Institute of Orthopedic Health Awareness, was the world’s largest manufacturer and retail distributor of athletic shoes. It had thrice consecutively been awarded the Frederick W. Taylor Award for Scalability in Manufacturing. “Made with Pride in the US of A” read the labels that were printed with pride in Lexington, Kentucky.

These labels were divided and shipped to China and Hong Kong, where they were affixed to low-quality footwear. The shoes were then packaged inside Taiwanese-manufactured red-white-and-blue

boxes that were dyed with the blood of the workers. (Meant metaphorically, of course. Even if it were possible to extract the factory workers' blood while still blue, it would not be commercially viable to imprint the vinyl before oxidation.)

"Now that the shareholders have voted against your executive pay packages, what are you going to do?" asked a reporter.

"There is nothing more deeply troubling to me than an unhappy shareholder," said Augustus. "I assure you that I am personally humbled and that every member of our board of directors will take this to heart. And even though the resolution passed was nonbinding per the laws of the State of Connecticut, we will consider it deeply when we reassess the pay. However, at Apate, we believe in attracting and retaining the top executive talent possible, so we will be sure to retain competitive compensation."

Standing slightly less than six feet tall (his driver's license marked it exactly at six), Augustus was a handsome man with carefully slicked-back hair. He was a middle-aged man who had a rare mix of venerable distinctiveness and youthful vitality. This was no accident, however, since his personal trainer held him on a strict regimen of diet and exercise that he stuck to religiously, with the notable exception of alcohol. His skin shone with an earthen glow: He was fresh from his weekly stint at the tanning bed. It had never once occurred to him that the same effect could be gleaned from the sun.

Like the other officers of Apate, he was extensively educated. Instead of earning an MBA from an Ivy League school, however, he had studied at a performing arts college. An actor by trade, his agent had lined up his current gig.

"But I don't know the first thing about shoes," he had said.

"That doesn't matter a bit, my friend. All they want you to do is hold press conferences and give speeches at universities and charity events. They want a new face for their company. And they want *your* face."

Despite his initial concerns, he had quickly grown to love his new position. It was much less labor-intensive than he had assumed it would be, and the perks were astounding. Benefits included a company car with a chauffeur and a corporate jet that he could commission on demand. He often flew about the country to dine, charging the meals to his company card. It was the best job he had ever had.

"Year over year revenue growth was down four percentage points," complained the next reporter. "What are you planning to do to reaccelerate growth?"

After a deliberate drink from his "water" glass, Augustus adjusted his non-prescription glasses and said, "I am happy to announce that we have just completed an assessment with a top consulting firm. They have advised us on this very question.

“They identified our advertising division as an underutilized asset, and suggested a radical change in the way Apate does business. So, here at this meeting, I am delighted to announce that we will develop advertising for external clients. No longer will the creative marketing firepower of Apate only be focused on our own products. We have already lined up a game-changing client. Together, we will bring forth a product that will revolutionize retail.

“I would like to thank each and every one of you for your questions, but I am afraid that is all the time I have for questions.”

Chapter 2

“Are you kidding me? They want us to plug tracking devices? They might as well be hunting these people down and sedating them with blow darts. They’ll wake up in the mall with a tag on their ear. ‘What the hell happened to me, I was just checking the mail and the next thing I know my clothes feel loosened and my arm hurts.’” Oscar Vignette, Chief Technology Officer of Apate, collapsed into his chair.

“The first thing we will need is a catchy acronym.” Sheldon Dupuy, the Chief Marketing Officer, had earned his MBA from the Wharton School of Business with a concentration in acronyms. “Some sort of action verb... It’s gotta really catch the ear. Something that you hear and go ‘Man, I’d sure like to do that, whatever it is.’”

He was the father of the ever-popular SMASH line: Superbly Manufactured Athletic SHoe. He had worked at two Fortune 50 companies before signing on with Apate a few years earlier. Some of his triumphs included the Chevy THRUST (Turbo Half Reliant Underline Suspension Truck) and the Pitney Bowes EAGLE (Extended Automated Gear Landing Ensemble). He was truly an artist.

“Or some kind of animal. Something dynamic and romantic. People like birds: they learned in high school that they represent freedom. The cat family tests pretty well, too. Lions, tigers, whatever, as long as they hunt and can be glorified.”

“It is my humble opinion that neither some denomination of wildebeest nor a transitive verb will mollify the unwashed masses,” said Max Power, the Chief Financial Officer. Max disliked Sheldon. But then again, so did most of Sheldon’s business—and personal—acquaintances.

“We are considering a permanent scar on the forearm,” Max continued. “The ultimate acquiescence to technology. The complete and utter surrender to the unending juggernaut of progress. A loss of the very humanity of being human.”

“Max is right,” said Oscar. “No one is going to get a tag because there is a picture of a bobcat on it. Why don’t we just stick a microchip right in their brains?”

“I’m sorry, but did you win the Advertising Agency’s Award for Best Acronym three times?” asked Sheldon.

I wish that idiot never won a single Triple-A-BA, Oscar screamed internally. “Look, I’m just saying that we’re not piloting through familiar waters. This isn’t hawking cereal to kids or sneakers to teenagers. The usual standards don’t apply in this spectrum. Nothing like this has ever been done before.”

“It’s not exactly that far of a stretch, my melodramatic friend. How do you explain that?” asked Donald Foyer, the Chief Operating Officer. His laser pointer was affixed upon Max’s shirt. More accurately speaking, it was illuminating the designer logo that emblazoned Max’s Italian shirt.

“I’m afraid I do not follow this particular line of inquiry.”

“We have millions of kids out there with our logo plastered all over them. It isn’t just the shoes; they’re paying twenty bucks a pop for shirts, pants, hats, towels, wristbands, and just about anything else Product Development can come up with. You name it and we sell it. And the kids buy it. They’re like walking billboards. Christ, we’re paying that kid ten million a year to wear a hat while he golfs.”

“His new contract stipulates fourteen,” said Sheldon.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. We’ve got legions of customers willing to take on an active role in our advertising. It is a status symbol. It screams, ‘Look at me, I can afford to pay \$150 for a pair of sneakers. I’m successful,’” said Donald.

“People like to identify with a winner,” Donald continued. “Everyone wants to be on the victorious side. Don’t believe me? Look at the NFL. Which teams sell tickets? And which coaches get fired? Fans don’t exactly weather the bad times along with the good.

“What we’ve got to do is sell this thing as a mark of the privileged class, the calling card of social elitism. It’s simple social psychology theory: we create an in-group and an out-group. The in-group condescends the out-group while the out-group idolizes and seeks to join the dominant group.

“We have to develop a new class system of haves and have-nots. We must generate a clear delineation between hip, successful individuals on the cutting edge of technology, and feeble laggards holding desperately to their antiquated ideals and anachronistic modes of conducting purchases.”

Donald paused for dramatic effect, stood, and began pacing as he continued.

“We can start it with celebrities. Pay four or five A-listers to go with it. Before we even say what it is. No ad push at all prior. All of a sudden, Joe Schmoe is watching the Oscars and he sees his favorite actress with an unfamiliar branding on her arm.

“He thinks nothing of it at first, until he notices his favorite musician has an identical marking. Then he starts thinking, ‘What is this all about? Where is the Rosetta stone to this puzzle?’”

Donald smiled at Max’s favorable reaction to the metaphor and continued.

“Pretty soon he’s calling his friends. ‘Did you see that? What is it, some sort of Scientology thing?’ And his friends don’t know either. Rumors abound. People flood the Global Network with ill-conceived theories. Perhaps it is promotion for a new movie? But no, his favorite sports hero wears the emblem himself. He’s certainly not starring in any movie. And neither is his favorite rock star. Still nobody can decipher the puzzle for him. All he knows is that each of these idols, these prima donnas, is in some kind of secret club.

“And that’s when he wants in. We create this illusion of pseudo-royalty. And after a month or so of this extensive exposure, he still doesn’t have a single clue what it is. Then it doesn’t matter what we do. We’ve got him. He’d pay us \$50 to cut off his own balls and feed them to him.”

With a slight flourish, he sat down.

“Perhaps I was a bit hasty in my judgment of your initial proposal,” said Max. “I believe that your phrase ‘status symbol’ could be pregnant with potential. That indeed could be our very approach, a sort of neo-designer elitism. We could cover the scar with a logo, similar in nature to the Zex, that could become an indicator of socioeconomic prowess.”

“Yes, yes indeed,” said Donald. “We must first come up with the perfect acronym.”

Oscar took to his feet and addressed the gathered men.

“Why don’t you work on that, Sheldon? Meanwhile, I’ve got an in with Leonard Firefight, the talk show host from Empire News. He could get us a full hour in prime time if we grant him an exclusive. As long as he is reporting it before everyone else, he can get it plenty of airtime. All we have to do is put a prototype in him and he can do the rest.”

“Are you sure that it will be wise to grant an exclusive?” asked Sheldon. “Won’t that limit our exposure?”

“Are you kidding? How many news organizations do you think there are? If it’s running on EN, it’ll be on CNN and Fox News the next day. We just give him an exclusive to break the story; after that, it’s open season. They’ll run ads that are nothing but him in a room with the tattoo showing. By then, the audience will have seen it on TV and whatnot, but the celebrities with the tattoo will have stayed silent about it. Then Leonard has this commercial where he shows the mark and says, ‘The tattoo will be explained tonight at eight PM,’ or something a little bit jazzier along those lines, and it’ll get massive ratings.”

Chapter 3

Jason Sanderson watched the raindrops materialize from the air and collect upon the windshield. It was a stifflingly muggy day, like all the rest in recent memory. The dashboard thermometer showed a Fahrenheit reading of 94 degrees.

Suddenly a downpour struck. Huge gobs of water began pelting the glass frenetically, exploding with each strike. Their spent fury was then swept aside by the smooth movement of the windshield wipers.

Swish, shucka.

The Redundant Displays of Critical Information (RDCI) alerted Jason in a soothing green color, in spectral proximity to a deep forest, that the vehicle was decelerating ten miles per hour in order to “accommodate the change in operating conditions.”

The text was rendered in a 14-point font, and slightly whimsical serifs hung from roughly half of the chubby letters. It conveyed a rounded, reassuring look, without risking the informality or even frivolousness implied by a cursive typeface.

Warning messages, when necessary, were backlit in stark red. Ugly, angular letters composed them. They were brief, no-nonsense missives. Jason knew all about them. He had designed the interface.

Swish, shucka.

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had begun and the sun pierced the quickly dissipating clouds. The roadway began shedding its newly acquired moisture as violently as it had received it. A thick mist rose around the monstrous vehicle, boiling harshly off the superheated blacktop.

He could almost hear the drops being absorbed back into the air. It was a torturous and endless cycle. It may have been 110 degrees out west, but it was a dry heat.

The monolith in front edged forward. Jason was now staring at his rear monitor, the electronic equivalent of a rearview mirror, inset in the dash. He was watching the radiant young woman piloting the convertible behind him.

It was a ludicrously small model of a European car that certainly hadn't been manufactured in the previous fifteen years. She whipped her soaked locks backward and laughed. Throughout the fleeting deluge, she had left the top down.

She was singing loudly, swaying gracefully back and forth to the music. Her delicate wrists pounded the furry steering wheel on each first and third beat, her head nodding on each second and fourth.

Swish, shucka.

The RDCI was drawing attention, in a hue somewhere between a powder blue and an azure, to the fact that the wiper speed was now being downgraded to an intermittent three. It was the same stout serif. It enveloped a different combination of the display quadrants, however, than the previous notification.

The Aplate advertisement, featuring a very well respected sports figure, no longer adorned the upper left corner. An irresistible close-up photograph of a pizza had replaced it, loaded with Jason's favorite toppings: fresh tomatoes and onions. He thought back to the beta testing of the console. It had two screens at the time, a large and a small one, dedicated respectively to conveying navigation messages and real-time advertising.

A significant number of the original system testers had obscured the Ad Screen, blocking it entirely from their view. Four had used duct tape, two used masking tape, and one even cut out a proportional piece of cardboard. *The nerve of them. Somebody's got to pay for the bandwidth, and God knows the customers won't do it directly.*

So, they had gone back to the drawing board.

The Artist had drawn a sketch and then modified it per the instructions of the assigned Human Factors Engineer. He passed it along to the Designer, who quickly reconstituted it and sent it to the Information Architect—Jason. He translated it and sent copies to Engineering, Development, and Quality Assurance.

It used a single screen, divided logically into quadrants (although with a potential spillover of 20%) to convey both urgent navigation information and specifically targeted advertising to the passengers of the vehicle.

The ad's location was determined, during each update, by a random-number generator, seeded by a combination of the odometer's reading, the temperature, and the time. There was no way to avoid the advertising while preserving the messages.

Jason would have received credit, if such credit had been offered, for the somewhat creative solution.

“When was the last time a person—an individual—invented something?” he mused quietly. “I can’t remember the last time I heard of an invention. There have been product innovations, created by work teams and focus groups and Consumer Oriented Development Groups. Ideas are the intellectual property of corporations. In a hundred years, the only names in the history books will be companies.”

Swish, shucka.

“Unable to understand instructions. Please rephrase directive,” the RDCI requested politely in mustard-colored letters. These were taller, mono-spaced characters, sans serif for a direct effect. “Drink victory: drink Peregrine Sports Beverage,” it continued. The figure of a peregrine falcon, swooping powerfully toward an unseen adversary which was presumably defeated in a glorious manner, hung from the upper right corner.

“I guess there was that guy from 3M,” Jason continued. “The one that came up with the stuff on the backside of sticky pads. He was trying to make glue, but it wouldn’t hold to anything. Then it turned out to be the most profitable patent in company history.

“He sure made an invention... and he was duly rewarded. Management went out of their way to stress an entrepreneurial corporate culture, instituting a commission-style incentive for innovations. What was that guy’s name?”

Swish, shucka.

The car’s computer, finally piecing together an instruction, silently displayed Jason’s contact list.

The girl in the monitor hid her eyes behind sunglasses. He saw her left arm flex, followed by the soft movement of her wipers. Thirty seconds later, or, more accurately, twenty-seven seconds later, this drama was repeated. It happened again twenty-nine seconds later, and once more twenty-six seconds after that.

Jason’s counting confirmed his suspicions: the girl was manually controlling the wiper blades. She was probably shifting gears and steering as well. Why was she smiling so carelessly? Certainly the repetitive motions must have irritated her, drained her time and energy. And yet she laughed, still damp from the rain that had just fallen.

He tore his eyes from her image, and thought about the drought. The previous day, they had been thirteen inches below the annual expected amount of rainfall. He glanced at the digital calendar, which had just shifted from the upper left quadrant to the lower left quadrant.

“Damn, it’s an odd-numbered day. I won’t be able to water my lawn until tomorrow... and even then I’ll have to wait until after eight.” Hopefully the lawn had absorbed a significant amount of the precipitation.

It was only 4:15. His SUV inched forward lethargically, three feet closer to home. Normally he would still be working, but he had finished the week's duties early. He had no remaining Pending Tasks or Team Responsibilities.

"I really should have gone slower at work today," he reflected. Friday traffic was the worst. He had left the office at 2:00, and yet he was still stuck in the evening's deadlock.

The sun was presented in its full luminosity now, unencumbered by the weight of clouds. His windshield was dry, the air pregnant. Much to his regret, Jason realized that the nymph behind him had vanished. A dark gray tractor-trailer had replaced her. He was unable to read the name of the company off the cab, but he assumed that the truck's payload was something that was urgently required by whichever town it was headed to.

The ETA panel, a backwards-running clock counting down the seconds until he would arrive home, read 5:13. Jason settled heavily into his recliner.

Chapter 4

Mittsi the dog had comprehensive health insurance. She had a Primary Care Provider (PCP), a veterinarian who could refer her to any fellow physician he chose, as long as that doctor was an in-network provider. Her plan included a reasonable prescription drug plan that covered ninety percent of the cost of pre-approved medications.

Mittsi's PCP referred her to a Veterinary Psychologist who diagnosed her with Separation Anxiety Disorder and prescribed Calmiclom, a powerful antidepressant with the occasional side effects of anxiety, diarrhea, and vomiting. Luckily none of these occurred in Mittsi's case. The doctor was, of course, an in-network provider and Calmiclom was, of course, a pre-approved medication.

Mittsi used to cry and howl when her owners left for work. She would tear through the house, ripping into pillows and upholstery. She would claw the door and jump up on the windowsill, caterwauling like a car alarm; her neighbors occasionally threatened to call the police because of the racket. Then when one of her owners finally returned, Mittsi would explode with joy, running around in circles and leaping as high as her stubby legs would allow. Shrieking, she would try her hardest to bathe the person in saliva.

This was no longer a problem; the medication seemed to be effective. Under its influence, she maintained a subdued demeanor, presumably sleeping or engaging in other nondestructive activities while her owners were away. The medication was part of a package, a regimen of therapy. Her behavioral treatment involved the Pavlovian jingling of keys and the donning of coats to allay Mittsi's Fear of Abandonment. It was all very complex, really, and yet it seemed to work relatively well. At least she wasn't tearing up pillows.

Another aspect of her therapy was the constant presence of television. Her owners would leave it on all day while they were away, setting a preprogrammed digital receiver to cycle through Mittsi's favorite shows. The CRI, or Canine Reaction Index, of each individual program told her humans which

shows were her favorites. Each network assigned every program a CRI, a scientific value that was presumably scored by a lab full of highly trained professionals utilizing some sort of exhaustive methodology. In exchange for a reasonable fee, of course. During any particular time slot, Mittsi's owners would set the receiver to gravitate toward the program with the highest CRI.

They even began leaving the television on while they were home, and Mittsi would watch it attentively. A blank stare would settle upon her face as she lay across the sofa-recliner combo for hours at a time. Sometimes she would even refuse to go for walks outside. When forced, she would shuffle onward reluctantly, pausing every few steps to cast a solemn gaze upon her walker, a piteous, accusatory pose that seared the person with guilt. Then she would resume her glacial pacing, pulling the leash toward home. Her walks used to stretch upwards of an hour, but after she began treatment, they rarely exceeded fifteen minutes.

Her newfound sedentary lifestyle, coupled with a renewed zest for consuming Happy Dog™ brand dog food, lent her body a rounded appearance. In order to combat this trend, her owners started her on Diet Happy Dog™, which featured twenty-seven percent fewer calories and thirty-three percent less fat (forty-six percent less saturated fat). So far she hadn't taken much of a liking to it, but she ate it anyway, choking it down with a fair amount of braying and whimpering and that same despondent stare.

When she was out of food, she would nose her bowl about the kitchen, forcing a clatter from the linoleum. Or she would paw upon the cupboard door, pitifully demonstrating her inability to open the cabinet and her tacit knowledge that a monstrous bag of Diet Happy Dog™ with patented EZ2Pour™ technology awaited her on the other side. All the while, she would whine in a barely audible tone, varying pitch and frequency occasionally so that her owners could not ignore it. They usually broke down and refilled the bowl.

It was a necessary evil, they thought. Besides, wasn't obesity really just a symbol of affluence? Was there anything wrong with their dog living comfortably? It was certainly better than having her starve. So she put on a few pounds. At least she was happy. And quiet.

Chapter 5

Project DogTag was an initiative forged by an unnamed consortium of consumer goods, electronics, credit card, banking, medical supply, and entertainment giants.

Prosperity Medical Systems developed a microchip for human insertion. While it took the company well over a year to get it approved by the FDA, Prosperity sold them in several countries in South America. The most common uses were for identification of prisoners and high-security employees in both the public and private sector.

Even when Prosperity gained approval for use in America the following year, widespread usage remained elusive. People were distrustful of the technology and unwilling to receive implantations. The goal of Project DogTag was to change that.

Physically speaking, a tag was nothing more than a tiny microchip that was implanted subdermally in a consumer's upper arm. Ominously large needles were used to insert them and left a small, but noticeable, scar.

The human tag was designed to encode a plethora of facts about the host individual. The first piece of information it contained was a digital fingerprint that was used to identify him or her uniquely. This was, simply enough, a digitized representation of the host's physical fingerprint. This setup created a unique identifier for each person with a chip, and added an extra level of biometric security.

The engineering group developed digital scanners, similar to the type used in warehouse settings for tracking inventory, to read and interpret this ID from up to thirty-six inches away. A host's tag was also capable of receiving information from these scanners, enabling a two-way data flow.

Soon after developing this technology, the top management of Prosperity realized that it would need a great deal of help to reach commercialization. It formed alliances with several other companies, creating a "pooling of interests" and appointing a controlling board to oversee the initiative.

The first goal of Project DogTag was to create a new, safer form of digital currency to replace credit cards in the consumer arena. Fraud was increasing rapidly, due in part to the growth of consumer purchasing via the Global Network.

It was simply impossible, in a profit analysis sense of the word, to accurately check the validity of a signature. Not all transaction processing systems required the physical presence of a card, let alone any sort of cryptographic fraud analysis.

And customers knew this. They were canceling their credit and debit cards in droves, due to security concerns. Consumer confidence in these mechanisms plummeted and the news media oversensationalized the matter.

To combat these fears, DogTags used an encrypted key to securely access customers' bank accounts and conveniently debit said accounts in order to complete the purchase of goods and services.

Beyond this mere pecuniary usage, however, stood a far more powerful capacity, in a profit analysis sense of the word, for tracking and predicting consumer behavior. The flip side of the tag's security, the lost anonymity of purchase, provided a unique opportunity.

By tracking consumer behavior, Prosperity hoped to develop mathematical models to predict future behavior. It was the ultimate in market research. If Prosperity could predict what mix of products consumers desired, when they wished to purchase them, and where they wanted to shop, it could optimize everything from manufacturing to distribution to inventory management to real estate decisions.

Because the vast majority of corporations had been building these models for years, this was not a particularly innovative idea. The statistical techniques presently applied for behavior analysis were deeply flawed, however, because the relative anonymity of contemporary purchasing techniques introduced a large number of inaccuracies into error calculations.

Consumers often shopped at multiple stores, relied on several credit cards, and used cash on some—and lately more than some—occasions. Simply put, there was no reliable method available to harness information into a single common gateway. A hundred corporations gathered data on a given consumer, each obtaining a single piece of the puzzle. They rarely shared these pieces, however, and even when they did, it was largely inaccurate.

Confounding the data analysis even further, multiple consumers often used a single account and single customers often used multiple accounts with any given vendor. This inconsistent data skewed results, creating inaccurate models and predictions. It was impossible, in a profit analysis sense of the word, for corporations to uniquely identify their consumers.

The tag system, however, provided the DogTag consortium with an unprecedented opportunity to track its hosts. A complete consumer profile, containing details ranging from music tastes to favorite brand of jeans to preferred breakfast cereal, could be generated quickly and easily.

Statistical analysis techniques could then be used to classify and typify behavior: to paint an individual portrait of each consumer and then generalize this portrait into a reliable set of metadata that could subsequently be applied to other individuals. Products and services could be individually tailored to fit these profiles so that optimal customer service could be provided. Optimal, that is, in a profit analysis sense of the word.

The *customer is always right* mantra would quickly change. The customer who had a high propensity to purchase goods from a merchant, and who also had a substantial balance in his electronic account—as well as who may have been likely to cease purchasing from a merchant in the future if his immediate needs were not met—would be much closer to the goal of *always right*.

The 80/20 rule, which states that 80 percent of any firm's profits come from 20 percent of its customers, could guide a firm's customer relationship management, enabling it to focus its efforts on its most valuable customers. It could utilize variable pricing to maximize profit, establishing a pseudo-class system.

But the consortium first had to figure out how to get consumers to implant tracking devices in themselves.

So, the newly reborn Apat Advertising Agency was employed. It was the first external marketing project undertaken by the newly right-sized corporation.

Chapter 6

The afternoon shower had not reached this far north. Something was not quite right as Jason Sanderson briskly piloted his SUV onto Frances' Store Road, named for a quaint town shop on the corner. It had been a convenience store for the local residents, back when convenience had meant a fifteen-minute drive.

Since then the suburbs had spread relentlessly, assailing the countryside in ever-expanding concentric circles. New subdivisions, with homes conveniently starting from the low 160's, or sometimes estates, starting not quite so conveniently from the 410's, sprang up in a manner similar to the dandelions that these properties' owners so valiantly and chemically battled. Frances' Store was now nothing but a vacant, derelict shack.

Jason owned a home at 222 Evergreen Terrace. Located exactly thirty-nine miles from the downtown perimeter, and sixty-three miles from his office, it had been a steal at \$220 thousand. It was a spacious one-story home with elevated 27-foot ceilings in several rooms and a full-sized, unfinished basement.

As he rode, he couldn't help but feel as though something was amiss. Perhaps it was the slightly acrid smell, no, taste really, in the faithfully re-circulated air of his vehicle. Perhaps it was the traces of shouting that could be intermittently heard over the stereo's "aural blanket." Perhaps it was the reddish flickering that was faintly visible against the clouded backdrop of the spring afternoon. Or, perhaps, it was the dense black smoke billowing from a lot that was quite unmistakably his.

Yes, that was definitely it. He saw four people. Joe Stentley, of 224 Evergreen Terrace, was flailing wildly, an empty bucket clutched tightly in his right hand, stomping fiercely at the brilliantly ablaze lawn(s). Joe's wife, Lonnie, stood in the street, shaking with rage, shouting, and clutching her small dog Mittsi to her chest. "What the hell is wrong with you? With us in the house? Were you trying

to kill us? Jesus Christ, you might end up in jail! Look at the neighbor's yard! It's five feet from their deck and still spreading!"

To Lonnie's right, directly across from Joe, violently pounding the ground with the business end of a shovel, stood Max Power of 226 Evergreen Terrace. He was wearing a delicate silk tie, pulled loose after a presumably difficult day at the office, over an attractive Italian shirt. He wore no pants; electric blue and green boxers were all he wore beneath the belt, save for a pair of ornately stitched argyle socks. He stood on his driveway, leaning sharply forward and screaming incoherent obscenities as he repeatedly assaulted the same patch of crackling grass.

On the porch of 222 Evergreen Terrace, Jason's wife Trudy sat calmly on a plastic chair. She was holding a slender glass of wine in a similarly slender hand, pressing a cordless phone to her ear with the other.

Jason stopped his vehicle directly in front of a fire hydrant, laughing at the chaos. Max dropped his shovel and began swatting his now-ignited socks with his palm. He swung a bit wildly at his raised foot and fell soundly onto his backside.

Mittsi whined, but Lonnie now echoed Jason's ebullient laughter. Trudy's shoulders rose and fell slightly, betraying a sliver of mirth. She pressed the hang-up button and skipped lightly down the stairs.

Joe, his leg now ablaze, sprinted to the edge of his yard as the flames spread to his back. He dropped like a stone, rolling violently and igniting virgin sections of brown grass. Still his carpenter-style pants re-lit, a demented parody of trick birthday candles.

Trudy strolled to the side of her neighbors' house, utilizing a pathway that was not yet aflame, and twisted the water valve in a counterclockwise direction. Three sprinklers, strewn equidistant throughout the lawn, sprang into life. Her lawn was extinguished in a matter of minutes.

"I think my method is a bit more effective than your shovel, Max."

A loud pounding on his driver's side window startled Jason.

"You have got to move this vehicle at once, SIR! You're blocking the hydrant!"

It was a fireman. He didn't look quite scruffy enough, really; he was clean-shaven with a medium-length haircut. If he had rippling chest muscles, they were anything but discernable through his pale yellow coat. Jason was slightly disappointed.

"Sorry... it's my house. I'm moving it now."

The three firemen attached their hoses and turned them on the blackened lawn. The water pressure was low, due to the drought, so the spray was not particularly forceful. A fireman, the one who had knocked on the window, trained an arc on the writhing figure of Joe—perhaps a few seconds longer than necessary to fully extinguish him.

Jason re-parked his vehicle behind a special-unit police car. An officer stood in front of it, precisely writing on his pad. Jason approached him and addressed him in the most calm and respectful voice that he could muster. “Thank you for your help, officer. It looks like the firemen have the matter fully contained.”

“Are you the owner of this house?”

“Well, technically the bank owns it, but I think for all intents and purposes I am.”

The officer did not acknowledge his attempt at humor in any way. “Sir, are you aware of the watering restrictions that have been mandated in this county?”

“I... er... Yes, I think so.”

“And are you aware of today’s date?”

“It’s the ninth, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. You mentioned that you are aware of the current odd-even watering restrictions, so you are aware that citizens whose addresses contain odd numbers are only allowed to irrigate their lawns on days with calendar dates that are also odd. Conversely, residents whose addresses are even numbers are only allowed to irrigate their lawns on days with even calendar dates. Furthermore, you are aware that all personal irrigation is prohibited between the hours of eight AM and eight PM.”

“Yes, I know all that. I’ve seen you on TV. But what does that have to do with me?”

“Sir, is your personal irrigation system currently engaged?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“And is your address an even number?”

“Of course it is.”

“And you have already admitted to knowing that the date is, in fact, an odd number. I have no choice but to issue you a citation for violating code GA103-21-1384.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

“Sir, the Police Chief has entrusted me with the position of Lead Officer of Responsible Water Consumption, and I take that position very seriously. You are quite obviously in violation of the current restrictions.”

“But my wife was using the sprinklers to put out the fire. You certainly can’t charge me with watering my lawn.”

“I’m afraid that I can’t go around making exceptions. The ordinance clearly states that no exceptions are allowed without a permit. If you wish to engage your irrigation apparatus on odd days, then I encourage you to pursue such a permit. You can pick up the forms down at the public annex.”

“But I wasn’t watering my lawn. My wife was using the sprinklers to put out a fire.”

“Sir, it is the responsibility of the fire department to extinguish any uncontrollable blazes. They are on the scene and are in command of the situation. Yet, your irrigation apparatus is still engaged. I have pulled up your records from our files, and I see that this is your third offense. You are now classified as a repeat offender.”

“What are you talking about? This is the first time you’ve ever been here.”

“Our database shows you with two prior citations. I’m afraid that our computer system cannot be questioned. Subject to Ordinance GA103-21-1385, you will be required to attend an approved DRIP class in the next sixty days or else a bench warrant will be issued for your arrest.”

“What the hell is a drip class?”

“DRIP is the Directive for Responsible Irrigation Program. It is a course designed to teach you the tenets of responsible water consumption and provide you with the tools to improve your habits. There are many state-licensed schools at which you can register.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Jason accepted his citation.

“It is not too late to become a responsible member of the community. I hope that you enjoy that class and really take it to heart. But if you don’t, I will be back.”

Two hours later, the five neighbors sat on Jason’s deck, watching the sun creep below the horizon. Jason and his wife Trudy, along with Max, savored a bright blush wine with a sharp taste, while Joe and his wife Lonnie enjoyed a domestic beer in convenient sixteen-ounce cans. The can sported an award that the recipe had won in a contest seventy-five years earlier. Perhaps, thought Jason, the competition had not been held since.

Mittsi lay at Lonnie’s feet, snoring comfortably.

Trudy leaned upon the railing with her wineglass in her hand. She was a remarkable woman, exquisite, and radiant with energy. Often, such as times like this, Jason would simply stare at her and wonder how he managed to trick her into marrying him. He could only suspect that she wondered the same thing.

Throughout the late afternoon, the humidity had been smothering, but the fall of darkness dropped the temperature and wrung the water from the air. It came as light droplets intermittently from the heavens. The result was a comfortable evening, for early summer.

Joe suggested holding a cookout as a way to say “I’m sorry that I poured gasoline on your lawn and lit it on fire.” Unfortunately for him, he had no grill, so Jason offered his own. He wheeled out his TurboGrill 1200, a machine that outweighed him. When he had bought it two years earlier, it took him over a month to assemble. It came with hundreds of nearly identical-looking pieces: screws with Allan

wrench heads and mysterious lengths of corrugated metal, more than a dozen of which were left over when he finally finished the assembly.

It was a gas grill that delivered 36,000 BTU per hour and provided a 550-degree broiling temperature. With a massive 600 square inches of surface area, its features included a stainless steel cart, an extra-thick aluminum body, and a push-button electric ignition system. It also boasted the benefits of GrillRite™ technology.

So read the box, which bore a scene of incalculable familial bliss: A father, draped in a chef's hat and smock, serving a perfectly grilled hamburger to a delighted boy. Behind him stood his breathtaking wife and startling daughter, each visibly stricken with adoration for the virile father and a deep anticipation of the expertly prepared food. A finely manicured lawn provided a rich emerald carpet while a cloudless blue sky served as a backdrop.

Jason had struck a great bargain for the machine at eight hundred dollars at Empire Home Warehouse. It was a lot of money, granted, but if he was going to buy one, he might as well buy one that he really liked. After all, wasn't the reason that he worked so hard, so that he could afford nice things? Didn't he deserve to have the latest in GrillRite™ technology?

In the roughly two-year interval between the day he finished assembly of the TurboGrill 1200 and the evening that he hosted this particular barbecue, Jason had used the machine a total of five times. Three of these occasions took place in the week following assembly, and the remaining two were annual Labor Day barbecues.

"I feel really bad about burning up your lawns, guys." Joe Stentley, dressed in a stained "Kiss the Cook" apron and an oversized chef's hat, was flipping a steak with a spatula. Joe was the type of guy who impassioned every utterance; his eyes blazed with every statement, every observation, every conviction.

"I really didn't expect it to go up that fast. I was watching The Lawn Channel and that's what they did. They said if your lawn is dead, it ain't got enough nitrogen. You light it up and two weeks later it'll grow in greener than ever.

"That guy on the TV, he made a pile of pine straw for kindling and dropped a match on it. So I tried the same thing—took some from that pine straw island over there. It was a little damp, so I added a touch of gasoline to help it along. I'll be damned; it went up like a Roman candle. They didn't say anything about that on TV.

"I just figured, Hey, my lawn looks like hell. I haven't been able to water it on a regular basis because of those frickin' water restrictions they got. I always forget it on the damn even days—even if I remember when I get home from work, I usually forget by the time eight o'clock rolls around. How do you want your steak, Max?"

“I would like it grilled to the maximum perfection. Well done, please, but please be certain not to char it like you did my poor blackened begonias.”

“Jas?” He pronounced the syllable with an extended drawl, rhyming it with *face*.

“I’d like it medium. Just a little bit pink in the middle, if you could.”

“Please Joe, the next time you aspire to ignite your territory, I would appreciate some sort of advance admonition. Perhaps, in fact, you could withhold entirely from threatening my life, limb, and property in the future.”

“No problem, neighbor. They should have put some kind of warning on that show, though. It just don’t seem right. What if there were kids out there watching it? I’ll bet there’s a thousand lawns that got torched because of the show. We could probably sue them.”

“We better hurry up and eat,” said Jason. “It looks like that storm is finally moving in. Are you guys still going to help me hang drywall tomorrow? I’m going to pick it up around nine-thirty, so we can get started a little after that.”

“Hell yeah, I’ll help you,” said Joe. “I just got done finishing my basement last fall. I’ll teach you some of the tricks of the trade. But I’m going to the game in the afternoon, though. Boss gave me his season tickets from work. Seven rows over the opposing team’s dugout. Should be nice.”

“I too shall be in attendance at your soiree into home improvement. Ten, shall we say? Right after brunch and Imperative! on Empire News.”

Chapter 7

Through the previous nineteen quarters, the Apate Corporation had demonstrated a remarkable 17.9% compounded Return on Equity. This figure reflected a 27.7% Return on Invested Capital and an uncyclical increase in both Top and Bottom Line Figures.

Despite these encouraging numbers, Apate's Top Brass maintained a Five-Year Strategic Outlook. This procedure involved an annual Assessment of Departmental and Enterprise-Wide Analysis of Strategic Goal Attainment (ADEWASGA). The chief coordinating officer of each Strategic Business Unit was required to file a written brief detailing his employees' performance.

They were evaluated on a Circularly Defined Performance Grid, and individual scores were compared in a no-holds-barred competition. A complex weighted average, computed behind a wall of digital smoke, considered factors such as Employee Turnover, Pilferage, Absenteeism, Productivity, and several other quantitatively measurable approximations of employee competence.

Only key developers in the Department of Information Technology knew the actual workings of the ratings formula. Interestingly, the Chief Technology Officer, Oscar Vignette, was left entirely unaware of the complex inner workings of this performance yardstick. Some things that he was not informed of included: the fact that his own personal score was systematically lowered, the fact that key developers in the Department of Information Technology always scored well in performance, and the fact that several of these key developers regularly viewed pornographic films for hours at a time while at work.

Perhaps Oscar's persistently sub-par managerial scores were somewhat warranted after all.

It always seemed bizarre to Oscar that he would score so poorly, while those who reported to him got such exemplary marks. He had reduced Turnover to the lowest in thirteen years, an impressive feat in such a dynamic labor market. Productivity was up and pilferage was down. And yet he was convinced

that the rating program—like every other technological device he encountered—was consciously trying to sabotage his every action.

At first he had chalked it all up to coincidence. The parking gate wouldn't recognize his badge. *Coincidence*. His e-mail program sent to the entire staff each excruciating line item of his latest order from Red Hot Naughty Videos Incorporated. *Coincidence*. The coffeemaker filled his C1000 Thermally Insulated Beverage Canister with a superheated liquid that could strip paint off the walls. *Coincidence*.

It had all begun to add up. Through the years, Oscar Vignette grew convinced that there existed in the Global Network of computerized devices some manifestation of intelligence that held a personal vendetta against him. Somehow, simple rows of ones and zeroes had developed into a self-aware consciousness capable of manipulating any device with a chip in it. And it was infuriated. With him.

He spent a lot of time pondering the motives of The Force, as he referred to it. Perhaps he had unintentionally angered it through some seemingly insignificant, and yet unfathomably offensive, set of actions he had undertaken. His perceived foe had reduced him to balking frightfully, paralyzed with fear of potential repercussions, at nearly any decision.

Oscar let nearly all of his professional responsibilities fall to Fritz McGavin, a key developer in the Information Services division. He reported directly to Oscar and in many ways functioned as his best friend, although without the hindrance of actually liking him at all.

Fritz was an ugly fellow with a broad, porous nose and an untamable shock of greasy black hair. Thick lenses divided his acne-strewn face. He was approximately the size of an economy car and possessed roughly the same level of social graces. Unbeknown to Oscar, he had, on a semi-regular basis, scheduled and enjoyed company-funded trips to conventions honoring such Mission Critical Initiatives as comic books and video games.

He was, however, a technological wizard. As a child he taught himself assembly language and developed his own role-playing game.

In high school and college, Fritz had received unusually high grades, often at his own hands and long after the classes had been completed. He developed a mutating stealth virus that—although it made no intentional effort to destroy data—mushroomed throughout the Global Network at an astronomical pace. Its explosive replication left a trail of ruined routers across the GN, costing American businesses an estimated \$100 million in lost earnings. He even spoofed a digital trail back to a youth who had defeated him in a video game competition and claimed the championship.

In short, Fritz knew his way around a computer. He also knew his way around a parking gate. And an e-mail program. And even a coffee maker.

He was the lead developer in the evaluation software that drove the ADESWAGA. He was, on a related note, the only employee aware of the direct effects imposed upon individual ratings by such

seemingly disparate factors as the Cleveland Indians win-loss record, the weather patterns over Syria, and a random-number generator.

Management, however, worshipped the software as an idyllic masterpiece propelling Bottom Line Growth. The Annual Stockholders' Report even mentioned it: "The Apat Corporation is committed to maximizing Shareholder Value. Management's stated goal is to leverage key Core Competencies to ensure effective Market Penetration. Cost/Benefit Analysis is applied annually via a sophisticated Assessment of Departmental and Enterprise-Wide Analysis of Strategic Goal Attainment (ADEWASGA). Each Strategic Business Unit's true Internal Rate of Return is calculated and aggressively compared to its projected Return on Equity. Every link on the Value Chain is carefully examined, from Value Added Resellers to internal Customer Relationship Managers."

Despite its rosy financial history, Apat's performance was threatened. The Five-Year Strategic Outlook showed a slowing of market demand growth in the next twelve quarters, followed by a near cessation early in the fourth year. The firm's revenues could not be expected to keep pace with the S&P 500 index, let alone its net earnings. Several analysts were downgrading the corporation's stock, ruffling their plumage on half a dozen financial television shows.

Management realized that a dramatic Right-Sizing Effort would be the only way to streamline the torpid beast. One of the Big Two Consulting Firms was brought in to perform an Externally-Applied Value-Driven Status Assessment (EAVDSA). All of the firm's cash flows, both in and out, were allocated to the responsible Strategic Business Unit (SBU).

Then an Adjusted Present Value methodology was applied, utilizing Sensitivity Analysis in the forms of both Linear Programming and more complex Multiple Regression techniques. Each SBU, composed of between 50 and 1,000 workers, was boiled down, truncated to a solitary number: a measurement of expected value of future cash flows, an approximation of intrinsic economic worth.

These numbers were scrutinized and explicated, parsed and compared, assessed and examined.

In the end they conveyed one single message: There existed in Apat a division that simply was not expected to Deliver Results. Although it had to this point been the company's most successful SBU, it could hardly be counted on in the future. This division would have to be eliminated.

It was the shoe division. It had historically been the largest Profit Center (and coincidentally the only one) in the corporation. The consulting firm's report, however, indicated that Apat's only true core competency was in marketing—specifically advertising. The authors were impressed that this SBU was able to hawk shoddy merchandise to an unsuspecting populace at such an enormous premium. The company's most valuable asset was its trademarked logo, a curved letter X. Research ranked it third among recognizable symbols, just above the Christian Cross.

So Apaté was restructured. The plants in Asia were liquidated. The firm's inventory was sold off at reduced prices. Layers of designers, engineers, and support staff were trimmed away. The Apaté Corporation was reborn as the Apaté Advertising Agency. And the Project DogTag account was its chance to establish it as a global competitor in the arena of needs manufacturing.

Chapter 8

Mittsi was a Boston terrier, a bizarre little black-and-white creature with oversized protruding eyeballs. Sparsely covered with short hair as coarse as a wire brush, she weighed eleven pounds nine ounces. Her head appeared to account for half of this mass, and was affixed to her body without any discernible neck. She had only a stub for a tail, and squat feet that protruded from her body at unusual angles. Her face was a mass of wrinkles surrounded by disproportionately large ears. Her owner Lonnie often addressed her as ‘Adorable.’

During winter, she wore a red-and-white sweater with the logo of her owner’s alma mater prominently displayed. When it was extremely cold, which was not that often in Atlanta, she accessorized with little red booties. Lonnie used a matching leash to drag her around the neighborhood, squatting among the bushes as discretely as she could.

But now it was late April, when the temperateness of spring was supplanted by the relentless heat of summer, and Mittsi was sitting in a small waiting room of her Primary Care Physician who was, of course, an approved in-network provider.

Her mother Lonnie, who insisted on referring to the dog as her offspring, spoke to the doctor in hushed tones.

“It won’t hurt her, will it?”

“No ma’am,” he assured her. “It’s a routine procedure. Millions of pets in the US have them now.”

“But aren’t there risks with surgery?”

“It’s not actually a surgical procedure,” he answered. “The microchip is so small that it fits into a syringe. The implantation is just like any other injection, although it involves a larger needle.”

He was pressing Lonnie to purchase a PetID chip, a product made by Prosperity Medical Systems, Inc. A company known for manufacturing pacemaker controls, it owned patents on a technique for implanting microchips in patients. These devices were used to regulate operation of pacemakers and other electronic organs.

Coated with polypropylene to prevent rejection by the host's body, the chips required no internal power supply for operation. They passively drew current from the electromagnetic waves of the scanning machines to which they responded. Early models stored a few lines of text which were broadcast to such scanners when activated.

For well over two decades, the chips were used to catalogue and identify livestock. As technological advances forced both the cost and the size of the chips downward, animal researchers used them to track and study populations of various animals. Entrepreneurs later adapted the technology for pets.

"If she ever gets lost," the PCP explained, "Animal Control will immediately know where her home is. If she ever has, God forbid, some sort of medical emergency, her entire medical history will be available to any veterinarian in the nation. And if she is ever dognapped—which happens, I assure you, much more often than most people realize—you will have indisputable proof that she is your pet.

"Ultimately, it would be irresponsible for you not to get her tagged. It is a safe, simple procedure that will provide her with immeasurable protection, not to mention the peace of mind it will afford you. Of course I can't force you to get one, but I sincerely believe that you should."

He neglected to mention the commission that he would earn from Prosperity if she opted to get a chip.

"And besides, your insurance will cover seventy percent of the procedure. I can't imagine why you would have insurance and yet refuse to use it for such a basic process."

"All right, I guess so. Go ahead."

"Excellent choice. I thank you and, more importantly, Mittsi thanks you for this basic investment in her safety. Please talk to Karen at the front desk about arranging payment."

Chapter 9

Each Wednesday afternoon, all senior level vice presidents of Apate gathered for the Weekly Strategic Planning And Tactic Implementation Meeting (WeSPATIM).

“Good morning, gentlemen,” said Oscar Vignette, Apate’s Chief Technology Officer, as he leaned backwards in his plush fourteen-hundred-dollar leather chair. It offered full lumbar support and could be adjusted to over five hundred positions to accommodate its occupant. Around the marble table, located on the highest floor in the building, sat Max Power, Chief Finance Officer; Sheldon Dupuy, the Chief Marketing Officer; and Augustus Pyrite, the President and CEO. The Vice President of Human Resources was also technically present, but was actually nothing more than a costly computer program.

The consultant-approved Corporate Agenda Demarcation Document showed a date of April eleventh in an expensive font.

Donald Foyer, the Chief Operating Officer, shuffled into the room and sat down next to Augustus, providing a stark visual contrast. He was a paunchy, ugly man whose clothes were perpetually wrinkled. His nose hooked viciously to the left and his eyes were bloodshot. A wicked smile exposed his crooked, yellowed teeth. An enormous bald spot enveloped the back of his head, and his hairline had receded sharply to within an inch of it. His remaining hair was limp and greasy; he had long since given up on instituting any sort of comb-over.

He was smart, though, a shrewd and clever businessman. Officially speaking, he was the Chief Operations Officer, but he functioned as the de facto CEO. All decisions ran through him, and would have been rubberstamped by Augustus if he had ever taken the time or effort to get a rubber stamp. It was a rarity, in fact, for Augustus to show up for the strategic planning session at all.

Donald was not bitter about the board selecting the actor for the position when it came open. It was, in fact, Donald’s idea. Although he enjoyed the power of his position, he detested any part of his job

that brought him into contact with members of the general public. Just as he was not a particularly likable fellow, he did not particularly like others.

The other vice presidents disliked him personally to varying degrees, but respected his business sense. They rarely questioned his authority, and they chose their words carefully when they did. His leadership had swelled their paychecks and skyrocketed their equity holdings, and this fact was lost on none of them.

Donald, who sat at the head of the table whether the CEO was there or not, glanced through his agenda and let out a noticeable sigh. In a mildly vexed voice, he said, “Well, it looks like Sheldon has got the floor this morning. You’re going to talk to us about employee morale, I understand.”

Sheldon Dupuy, the Chief Marketing Officer, sprung from his chair and initiated the presentation software.

He always used presentation software.

The Apat executive boardroom was luxurious by any standard, and did not skimp on electrical gadgets. After Sheldon pressed a button, a ceiling-mounted projector vomited an image upon the screen. He had used the consultant-designed, company-approved template.

The first slide held a large Zex and Sheldon’s name in daunting letters. Projected upon the screen, they loomed well over a foot high. Below his name, in slightly smaller letters, was the phrase *Apat CARES*, with a secondary tagline that said, *Forging Employee Morale*. Extensive copyright notifications streamed across the bottom of the screen.

He clicked the cordless remote and advanced the slide, showing a two-by-two Harvard-style graph that was labeled *Employee Morale Index*. A black line snaked about the graph, tapering lower toward the right. Sheldon affixed his laser pointer on the image and began speaking in his deepest voice.

“This graph charts the Employee Morale Index of our fine company. It is gauged by weekly questionnaires that are administered anonymously. You should all be aware of the technique, since every employee gets the survey, from the boardroom to the mailroom.”

At this point he decided against revealing the paltry participation rate. After initiating the program and receiving few responses, he had made it mandatory, which had a strikingly negative effect upon employee morale. Question 21a, for example, provoked a large number of ‘very often’ answers. It read, “How often do you find yourself filling out paperwork that is unnecessary to your job?”

In response to these abysmal findings, he again made the survey voluntary. He also erased the initial data and inputted results that he felt better reflected the collective feelings of the employees. Then, after a month of tweaking the system, he reworded the survey to evoke more favorable responses and switched to actual data.

He clicked the remote again and another, smoother line appeared on the screen.

“This is a moving average of the Employee Morale Index. It smooths out the daily fluctuations that occur, making overall trends become more visible. Notice the downward trend here. We have lost a full thirty-seven points since the peak in November. And in the last two months, the drop has been precipitous. This is quite a frightening trend.”

He was walking about the room as he spoke. Every gesticulation was measured; he had obviously been practicing this speech. Oscar wondered if this man did anything else for his job.

Sheldon advanced the presentation and the screen sternly asked, *Why do we care about employee morale?* He echoed the question aloud and advanced the slide again to a bulleted list.

“One result of low morale is reduced efficiency. Employees are resources, similar to staplers and fax machines, and resources must be fully utilized to ensure profitability. Wasting resources is like burning money.”

The screen showed a caricature of a man holding a lighter to a sack with a dollar sign.

“Having inefficient employees is every bit as bad as having unused manufacturing production lines. Would we let our factories sit idle?”

Oscar considered mentioning that the factories had been sold off two months earlier, but decided that interrupting would only lengthen the presentation. The others shifted in their chairs.

With another slide advance, the screen glowed with a graph similar to the first one. This time it was labeled *Turnover*. The line was flat on the left side of the axis and dove lower midway.

“Another negative effect of low morale is the incidence of turnover, which occurs when an employee quits his job. The company must expend valuable resources to attract viable candidates, interview them, select replacements, assimilate them into the accounting and benefits databases, and train them. This is not a cheap process. When employees become unhappy with their positions, as evidenced by the Employee Morale Index, they begin to look for new jobs.”

Sheldon appeared disappointed that none of the executives were visibly impressed by this revelation. He had thought it a remarkable discovery at the time.

Undaunted, he pressed onward. The money-burning man reappeared on the screen underneath the question *What can we do about it?*

“The time for action is now. I have forged a program called *Apate CARES*.”

Oscar glanced at his watch, noting that fifteen minutes had passed since the presentation had begun. The current slide had the word *CARES* written down the left side of the screen. Each letter was bold-faced and sprouted another word to the right.

“*CARES* will become our new set of Corporate Values. I have carefully selected the values that I believe should drive us as an organization. They are Customer-focused, Accountability, Responsibility, Entrepreneurship, and Satisfaction.

“Customer-focused means that all employees should concentrate on pleasing the customer at all times. This includes people they interact with both inside and outside of the organization. It is important—”

“For Christ’s sake, Sheldon,” said Donald. “We know what these words mean. Can you get on with your damn proposal?”

Sheldon was miffed by the barb and stuttered for a moment before regaining his composure. He silently clicked through several explanatory slides and began speaking again.

“Well, yes, you can study up on the new values at your leisure. I have prepared a document that outlines them all and explains the context in which we, as an organization, will be using them. It will be distributed as soon as it comes back from the copy department.

“At any rate, these Corporate Values are what separates Apate from all of the other companies in the marketplace. This unique combination of ideals bonds our employees together. We are as much a family as we are a company. We are strong because of this unique blend of deeply held beliefs. Apate is successful because Apate CARES.”

Oscar wondered how such generic-sounding values could make the company unique. Why wouldn’t they apply to any other corporation? Isn’t Accountability the same thing as Responsibility? And is he sure that *Customer-focused* is hyphenated and not two words? It was as though he had lifted the values directly from an introductory-level business textbook.

Which, in fact, Sheldon had.

“Now, we must launch this new initiative decisively so that our employees understand how seriously we, the top executives, are taking this matter. I propose a company-wide meeting at one of the hotels downtown, where I can explain the new Corporate Values.

“Once everyone is familiar with the program, we must infuse it throughout our corporate culture. I have ordered stickers, such as this one, to attach to every employee’s ID badge.”

The sticker looked identical to the image projected on the screen, but it was the appropriate size and width for the identification badges. It was thick and glossy, certainly not cheap.

“We will append ‘Apate CARES’ to all company letterheads and invoices. It will be underneath the Zex in every official corporate communication, both internal and external. Everyone’s email will have it automatically appended. All shirts, mugs, and other promotional items will bear the slogan.

“Repetition is the heart of change. When an Apate employee answers a telephone, I want him to say ‘Apate CARES’ before he gives his name. I want to reserve a moment each morning for our Corporate Values, when every employee says them aloud in unison. I want to stop people in the hall and ask them what Apate CARES about. And every employee is going to be issued one of these.”

He pulled out a solid glass paperweight with nicely beveled edges. Deeply set in the glass, formed by colored particles of some sort, was the same design defining the new mantra. He handed it to Donald with a palpable sense of pride.

Oscar decided to voice his concern.

“Wouldn’t an easier way to improve morale be to stop laying people off every other week?”

“If we do a large layoff, we have to report it to the state. Rolling cuts are the only way we are going to keep it out of the paper. We don’t need that kind of negative publicity. This is the way to get happier, better adjusted workers.”

Now it was Max’s turn to register his dissent. “This blueprint for employee acquiescence to our corporate hegemony is as preposterous as it is ill-conceived. It is an abyss of idiocy, a senseless squandering of funds with only a miniscule probability of providing a fiscal return.”

Donald gripped the paperweight tightly in his hand, as he considered the proposal. Finally, his face untwisted and he looked at Sheldon.

“All right, we can give it a try. This is the kind of crap that the press loves. Besides, you’ve already ordered a few hundred of these damn things, haven’t you?”

Sheldon nodded sheepishly.

“Here you go, Max. Why don’t you take this one?” Donald made it sound like an order. “Perhaps you will warm up to the idea if you spend a little time with this lovely trinket.”

Max dropped the paperweight into his bag and pouted.

Breaking his long silence, Augustus Pyrite stood and said, “Well, gentleman, I have a press conference that I must get to. I certainly do hope that you enjoy the rest of this meeting.” The tanned CEO flashed a smile about the room and strolled out the door. His “press conference” was a secretary from the ninth floor that he had just met that day.

Buy the book to read on for only \$1.99. Go to <http://www.arttrezzo.com/nara.html> for more information.