

The Corporation

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Walter looked up at the sky. High over his head, a plane was creating a long cloudy streak on the bright blue canvas. In a next life, Walter thought, he would be a pilot. Just lift off the ground to be free from the earth and high above all things below. Above all those people with their insignificant petty lives. Lives which meant nothing, because they were lives led without perspective or motivation. People without a wider look, with opinions and views based on their own small world, without any ideas beyond what they knew. Only a paycheck every month kept them going. If only he could look down upon it all. But right now, he was not a pilot. No, he was one of those people.

Walter was still staring out of the window when a loud cough from his colleague Craig revived him. Without looking, Craig whispered: "Sit up and pretend to work!" Walter turned automatically towards his screen and put his hands on the keyboard. Moments after, manager Steve walked into their small two-desk office space. Steve was big, bald and short, and he had the bearing of a typical manager. But he was likable enough.

"Any big deals pending, guys?" Steve said, rubbing his hands together like he was looking forward to a good meal.

"Uhm..." Walter said slowly and went silent.

"I am looking into that Italian contract we drafted last week", Craig quickly said. "Should be promising!"

"Good, good", Steve said, not really listening anymore after he got the sense that things were alright. "Well, I will let you guys get back to it then." He moved his large body out of the office into the hall.

"You owe me one", Craig said from behind his computer screen. Their desks were placed opposite of each other, before the only window, with their computer screens between them. Walter's desk was a mess, as usual. Papers laying around and there were pens, pencils, paperclips, binders full of memo's, post-its and whatnot everywhere. He was sitting next to the only vegetation their small office had, a sad plant resembling some kind of palm tree. Through its hanging leaves Walter could see the world outside, which from

his view, apart from a small piece of sky, mainly consisted of the blind wall of the building next to their office tower.

The desk that Craig sat behind was clean and tidy. Neatly piled papers, all the pens and pencils in the small black containers that were intended for that purpose. You could actually see the top of his desk, which was a laminated brown wood print with black wood like patterns running through it.

Craig was about the same age as Walter, in his early forties. When they started working together, some eight years ago, Craig surely was thinner, but he still had most of his boyish figure. His perfectly cut dark short hair, the sharp nose with peering eyes above it and a smile that could appear in an instant, made him a typical salesperson. At least, Walter thought so. Craig's manner was easy and relaxed and he always paid attention to his surroundings, seeing things before Walter did. He always had a story ready to connect to other people. As he said himself, he was constantly on the lookout for opportunities and buying signals, as a salesperson should.

Walter was different. He didn't really like the layer of veneer that seemed to cover Craig. It all looked so smooth and fake. Walter always wondered if the person he saw was the real Craig. Always laughing about jokes (even if they were not funny), always that upbeat attitude of 'nothing is too much', always cheering for the company and always ready to serve a client with those fake smiles. It was unnatural to Walter, who liked to be straightforward and honest with his clients. He only sold them products when they wanted to buy, without unnecessarily charming them. After eight years, Walter still wasn't completely sure he wanted to be a salesperson. His manner was more introverted, his dark brown hair was uncontrollably messy, he wore glasses and he didn't think much of his looks in general. Which was an issue, if you had to present yourself as a confident, knowledgeable and sharp salesperson. Still, he managed quite well, as he usually had the clients that appreciated his honesty and that were not into those perfect glamorous sales pitches.

With their differences, Walter and Craig had learned to get along and had become some sort of friends in the eight years they knew each other. They discussed about work and the company and had the occasional drinks together after work.

“Did you read that memo we got yesterday?” Craig asked, leaning to see past his screen. Walter did the same to be able to see Craig and frowned.

“Memo?”

“Surely, you have seen it?”

“Well...”

“You are hopeless, you know that? Okay, let me read it to you.”

Craig disappeared behind his screen.

“The company introduces a new sales methodology that the sales department will have to use from now on. It is called WITY, which means ‘What’s Important To You’. An online introduction course will follow.” Craig appeared from the side of his screen again, his eyes still fixed on the memo.

“This really sounds interesting! It is about creating a sales process with the client to discover needs they didn’t know they had. Like a list of questions that maps what their company should buy from us.”

Walter’s first thought was that if this was a new methodology, he apparently had misunderstood his job in the past years, but he said: “Yeah, that will be useful for sales!” He shook his head and wondered who had had this brilliant idea, to make a method out of the most basic thing that anyone who wanted to sell something should do: ask questions to find out whether the client would need the products that he or she had on offer. He had found the memo in his email now and read through it himself.

“With the mandatory WITY-process you will know what the client needs and you can create sales opportunities for each need. We will be actively monitoring if a WITY as been performed and has been allocated quality opportunities.”

Walter sighed. What was wrong with just offering a good, competitive product, instead of clouding the sales job with all these irrelevant terms and mandatory processes that made everything so artificial?

Walter picked up the phone to call one of his clients. It was one of his favourite clients, but when he thought about it, he liked almost all of his clients. Being in a position where you can help someone with something they need is very nice. And if they are happy, they will pay, so the boss is happy as well. It was a very simple job really. Walter found the gratitude that people showed if you solved a

problem for them very satisfying. He always thought of himself as being on the side of the customer more than on the side of the company. Actually, since the Americans took over the company, it was almost a necessity to shield his long-standing clients from ridiculous ideas that popped up now and then.

After his call (the client was happy to hear from him, but there was no need for anything at the moment), Walter pondered whether he could book this as a WITY conversation. He had asked the client for his needs and there were none. But he hadn't used the prescribed list of questions that apparently made a conversation a WITY-conversation. It was all so stupid, because he knew that Steve, his manager, would ask about it in his annual performance review. Walter could see it happening.

"So Walter, what have you done this year?" Steve would ask.
"Well Steve, I had a WITY conversation," Walter would respond.
"Walter! I am proud of you. That is one added to my accomplishments as your manager."
"Yes, I know what is important to you, Steve."
"Did it bring you additional sales?"
"No, the client didn't need anything."
"That's alright, Walter, the higher management just wants to see that we use the method."

Surely, it would not go like that. It would be more like Steve frowning over his number of WITY conversations, stating that there were not many WITY's and how that would be bad for Walter. Although probably, Steve's biggest concern would be his own reporting to the higher management.

Managers in general (and Steve was no exception) were always keen on executing company policy, and if the board of directors ordered WITY's, then WITY's had to be delivered. That was the only job Steve had, making sure the policies were executed. What happened in the real world didn't really matter, because managers lived in an artificial world of spreadsheets, erroneous data, confusing managers' lingo and sales predictions that mostly were wild guesses created by account managers like Walter and Craig. As long as things followed the orders from higher up the chain of command, everything was alright.