

Talking Stick

by Walt Sutton

“It’s a Talking Stick, she says, for you from us. Thank you.” And with that she hands me this carved stick, a mini-totem pole with a handle, a compressed bird, perched on a frog (I think) carved from dark wood, signed on the butt of the handle with a sharpie marker.
- Jim 9/14/98.

Permission, that’s what the talking stick gives, it says “this person and only this person has permission to speak”. A pretty powerful stick if everyone understands the game. Permission to speak uninterrupted, permission to express freely, permission to be responsible, to be accountable too because permission to speak has its responsibilities.

I am surprised by the gift, touched and a little sad. It means we are done, our relationship is ending. This talking stick is not only a symbol of our time together, it is the tangible proof that our time together is bounded and the are at the end, right now.

Three days later I look at the bird and the frog fused together for life. They stare up at me from a glass topped coffee table and I feel an ache. I think I should pick up bird and frog and talk - to myself. I should talk to the part that feels the ache, the lonely part. I should give permission to myself to talk undeterred by the ache, talk deep to the place that hurts.... I should talk about driving to the lodge three weeks ago, before November rolled in and with sun blowing up the colors of changing leaves. If you squint you are half way to a smile and the sunlight on green, gold and red and orange is dazzling. Even without the glare, though, I was smiling, anticipating the fun. I should talk about that.

On paper, it was just an assignment, one of several I do each month, most months of each year. There was the call from a friend, the challenge of a leadership team “with issues”, the discussion of money and time and outcomes and later the “go ahead”. This “assignment” then sat dormant, buried, in my calendar of assignments until in the course of life, it reappeared, announced itself: The Bell Ringer Ltd Management Retreat. The title as written in my diary doesn’t exactly light up like “MTV” or foreshadow “Lady Chatterley” but titles often deceive, especially in business. Business titles play “dress up” they hide, distract or deflect most emotional content or hint of the human experience. Consider Employee Evaluation, or Goal Setting, or Reinforcement, each sounds harmless enough but we are really talking about sharpish opinions, coercion, arm-twisting, threatening and much worse as experienced by the poor sod whose name comes up for “adjustment” or “recalibration” procedures.

In any case there I was driving up the winding mountain road through autumnal forest to The Sky Watcher Lodge and the Bell Ringer Ltd. Management Retreat, smiling. New people, a new place, interesting issues and I get to be the ring leader if such a term applies to ordered anarchy. Since I have yet to do anything, I haven’t screwed up yet. I haven’t called a Jane, Janet, haven’t missed a potty break, haven’t misspelled the CEO’s name on a flip chart, haven’t alluded to the good life of wine sex and song to the hidden evangelical core of the “team with issues”, I have yet to get mad at a mean spirited



executive or carping critic. My slate is clean, I am full of the sense of possibility without knowing how I might blunder it away. This is the beginning, three days away from the “talking stick” and everything is perfect. The smile is appropriate and the glare is welcomed.

I wouldn't have chosen this place, too remote and hard to get to for the executives, but for isolation and splendor, it is perfect. Someone with money to burn decided to build a cedar and glass cathedral of a lodge two hundred miles from the nearest anything, on a hill top overlooking forest, and forest and forest and more forest as far as the eye can see. I have driven four hours from a very small outpost airport - two flights in and two flights out each day weather permitting. The “team with issues” arrives tomorrow along with the CEO. I always arrive early to set up and prepare. So I am greeted by bell staff in cowboy boots, matching jeans and shirts (yep, same red plaid with white snaps for buttons you'd expect). The bell boys and bell girls mostly have pony tails, are fresh scrubbed, tanned, and pretty attentive which leads me to think the lodge may be experiencing a slow season. Makes me think I ought to direct them to a good marketing consultant who would tell them a little about the poor batting averages of enterprise that rely on the “if you build it they will come” business model. But apparently the CEO intentionally choose the location and since he is paying the bills, deal done.

Michael is his name, the CEO whose team has issues. He didn't like the idea of my arriving a day early. “I don't want to interfere with whatever you do, Walt, but isn't that just a little over done, a whole day early, I mean I can guarantee that we will have everything set up just the way you want it and we can save a day here.”

“No, sorry. I always arrive a day in advance, otherwise we could end up spending more money on you and the whole team plus my fees messing about for half a day getting ready when we need to hit the ground running.”

“But my assistant knows how I want things done, she wouldn't dare...”

“Michael, I am sure your assistant is fantastic, this isn't about her, its about my guaranteeing that you and your team get the most out of our time together. To do that, I arrive a day early to set up and check the arrangements. How about this, when everything is checked, I'll stop the clock until you all arrive?”

“Well all right, just so you don't forget: money doesn't grow on trees around here.”

“Mm, Mr. ah, yes, hum, no well, yes I do have a party of five from Bell Ringer Limited, but you are not listed with the party, and they aren't arriving until tomorrow, I'm sorry.” HANK, the name embossed on his badge, looked up at me from behind the check in desk as if the conversation was over. His eyes were brown and at this moment curiously empty. If the eyes are the window to the soul the spirit had fled... nothing. As the word vacuous began to form in my mind, I realized Hank was in standby mode and would standby there smiling at me for a hundred years absent some recognizable signal or triggering stimulus like “shit Hank, I am part of the party, I am scheduled to arrive a day early and I want you to find me my room and our meeting room right now... over!”

“Huh, oh yes, right away Mr, what was it...?”

“S U T T O N.”

“May I have your credit card, sir so I can check you in.”



“They are supposed to be paying for my room, Hank, Bell Ringer.”

“Yes Sir, only I’ll need your credit card.”

Hank is smarter than he looks... checks me in and an hour later I am looking for Myra, the lodge’s meeting coordinator.

MYRA, same lettering, same shirt, five foot tall maybe, blond pony tail and scrubbed face, a little lipstick and smiling, she looks right at my eyes, there are frown marks on her forehead unused to such an expression, or maybe its just that she is very, very young. “Uh huh, well yes I saw something going on in “Moose Hollow” on the reacquisition list, only that’s for tomorrow, and like this is today, ya know?”

“Can I see the room to check it out?”

“I don’t know, I mean maybe there’s something in it.”

“Myra, are you in there, could you check and see?”

She nods “un huh” followed by a ten minute absence then reappearing as perky as if she had just discovered the capital of good-girl-land blurts out “guess what, there is nothing going on in Moose Hollow today, so you can do whatever you want in there”... and giggles with relief. She then guides me to the room which was as advertised, empty, a green carpeted room with pictures of moose, nine framed oil like paintings of moose in various poses, plus two moose heads stuffed and looking down at the room without not a stick of furniture but with a beautiful view, floor to ceiling glass on one wall looking out at the forest. Even empty Moose Hollow lived up to its name.

Eight hours later after discovering that there were no instructions about preparing Moose Hollow or orders for food, drinks, after I spent 45 minutes talking to Michael’s fabulous assistant who really needed therapy and a case of antacids more than talking to me because this was the first she had heard of any arrangements for anything. She was told to make reservations for the Management Team (aka team with issues) for two days at the lodge and reserve a meeting room which she did... literally. After all of this and after my calling Michael and having him talk to the Lodge accounting department to insure payment for all of these “extras” after his reminding me that money was not growing trees and after five gingham shirted elves appeared with tables, chairs, charts, a sideboard that looked to be carved from a single huge fallen tree, a screen and electrical extension cords, after all of this Moose Hollow was ready and the clock was turned off, right about midnight.

“I chose you to be our leader because you are the best speaker I have ever heard, I just knew you would turn our little group around, get everyone on the same page, teach them to step up and be counted.”

“Thanks Michael, I’ll do my best. Where did you hear me speak?”

“Well I didn’t hear you exactly, but I have a friend who runs a big operation in Oklahoma City, and he heard you someplace or another and told me you were really good.”

“Oh, okay, well what do you see as the team’s main issues?”

“You know they are good people, at least most of them are, and I like all of them only they just don’t understand what it is going to take to succeed, as a company I mean. I tell them over and over but they don’t seem to be getting it and the flag is about to fall on the last lap of the big race and I’m beginning to worry that we don’t have the horsepower to get into the winners’ circle. They have to get with the program right now before it is too



late and I know you are just the man to do it, to give us just that little bit of help we can't seem to get our arms around, by ourselves I mean."

"What type of help do you think you need?"

"Clueless, sometimes I just think they are clueless...." And so it went over breakfast on arrival day, dishes clattering as our table was cleared, red gingham shirts exchanged for green gingham today, ponytails swinging boots thumping back and forth on the deep red Indian carpets overlaid on rough looking wooden floors and Michael holding forth like a conductor who having lost his baton is making do with a fork the other hand checking for the presence of a small flesh colored band aid pasted on the side of his neck.

"Now I want this to be a forthright and candid session, get to the bone as quickly as you can, only I don't want to have any talk about money. They just don't understand money you see, and any talk about money isn't a good thing. They need to keep their eye on the ball, not be asking questions about what this or that costs or why we are buying this or that from this or that person, or what each other's paychecks are. No, money is off limits, you understand? Off limits."

"I'm not sure how you measure success if you don't somehow account for the money. In my experience money is important."

"I'm not saying money isn't important, I'm saying it is none of their business, and besides these aren't sophisticated people, they are good people but they need to learn how to work together not how much this or that costs or what the profit position of my company is."

"Certainly profits are your business, only they are going to need markers for success and usually money is one of them."

"I need to speak confidentially here."

"Okay".

"All right then, I don't mind telling you in confidence that we make a hell of a lot of money, profits are spectacular, and I don't want my employees getting fat dumb and happy by seeing our earnings and turning into a bunch of "third-worlders" figuring they have it made and coveting a share of my profits. Everyone is paid more than fair for what they do, but I don't want to confuse any of them by getting into a discussion about my private money matters. The ones who need to know will find out about money soon enough."

"All right, no discussion of profits, or costs, what else?"

"Nothing else, that's it, everything else is wide open. Get them stepping up and accepting the challenge, that's what they want and need. You know I like your style already, I know this is going to be a winner!" He grasps my wrist, his thick chubby fingers give me a confidential a squeeze sealing the deal.

The team with issues was waiting in Moose Hollow, gathered around a big cowboy coffee pot made into an urn with a spout. As I enter the room there is laughter, a joke I presume, hoping it isn't about me. Given Michael's descriptions, I expected something like what greeted Dorothy when she landed in Oz, you know a room full of ineffectual high voiced little people but of course this wasn't the case. I introduced myself and they did the same in voices naturally pitched. All them were regular looking people, not a nebbish in the group.



Michael danced into the room and as self selected master of ceremonies boomed out introductions, again: “This is Jason, he’s our IT guy, and Tamara, she’s HR and here is Leslie, she’s Accounting and Max our Vice President Sales and Marketing who also happens to be my son.”

“Hi”, I nodded towards the team with issues. Max who was a young, thin athletic but shorter version of his father broke away from the group to shake my hand holding my elbow pumping and smiling. “I can’t tell you how much we have been looking forward to this, it has taken me, no us, two years to talk the old man into doing this.”

Tamara piped up, “Yea, you know I bet Max a bottle of tequila he couldn’t pull this off, but here we are, I can’t wait.” She wore blue lipstick that somehow worked perfectly with her raven black hair cut like a carefully hung shoulder length cap, straight perfect hair, blue outlined lips, grey eyes, straight bangs, trim figure, taller than max and wearing an edgy one piece black jumpsuit. She moved up behind Max punching him in slow motion on the shoulder. “You win the bet babe, but I get to see what happens, hell of a deal.” They giggled - inside joke. I looked around for Michael but he was over by the food, loading up a plate of pastries fruit and a slab of cream cheese, apparently not hearing.

Facilitation sounds more directive than it is, this is to say there is a general perception that a group facilitator is “in charge”. Those who facilitate groups smile at this because facilitation in practice is completely inductive and produces little that is predictable although as a group member you wouldn’t know this because the first rule of facilitation is to act like what happened was supposed to happen, or as popular doggerel more directly observes: “don’t let the bastards see you sweat”. So even in the most cooperative of groups, facilitating is a little like trying to run on ice. None the less I took a deep breath, assumed my position as group facilitator for this two day planning session by closing the door, sealing Moose Hollow from the rest of the world and so signaled the beginning of our Journey.

I explained what we would be doing during our time together, told them about civility, openness, honesty, admonished against aggressive behavior, gave directions to bathrooms, set expectations for breaks. With relish I then did as I always do, put the leader on the spot. I asked to share with all of us what he expected from this retreat. He reddened some, looked out at the forest for a moment then turned his gaze back at me and said “I want my team to really work together, I want us to get over the hump, to rise to the occasion and cooperate with each other.” There were several seconds of silence and I asked if anyone had any question about Michael’s expectations.

“Anybody care about our expectations?” It was Jason who didn’t say the words exactly, he mumbled them.

“Yes, we do care”, I said. “Do you have expectations you’d like to share, Jason?”

“I wasn’t asking you actually, I was asking Michael if he cared.”

I looked over at Michael who looked puzzled. Finally, taking in a heavy breath he said “what do you mean do I care, of course I care. I said we are here to get on the same page didn’t I?”

Jason said looking at no one, “Okay, than an expectation I have is that we do what we say



we will do because I don't want to spend two days coming up with ideas that will be swept into the shit-can the minute we get back to the office."

"Michael", I asked, " what do you say to that?"

"Yea, damn right, sure, we need to do what we say, of course we do."

"Okay", I said, " let's get the rest of our expectations on the table..."

Jason, it seems has two lives, one lived in front of a computer and the other lived at his local gym. His eyes are from Asia, arms and chest and legs from the heavy lifting he apparently does daily. He is short, so with his hands folded in front of him, shoulders spread wide and the absence of a neck he gives the impression of a wave frozen in stone, sitting there, mumbling as opposed to clearly talking. Jason unmoving had broken the logjam and the others followed.

"How do we know what the same page is?"

"Why should we care as much as Michael?"

"What are my responsibilities"

"Where are we going?"

"Who makes the rules?"

"Has anybody considered...." And so on.

When everyone was done Michael sat quite, faced flushed red (again) fingering the band aid. I let the quiet settle, then began the next exercise, a simple inventory. What do we think our strengths and weaknesses are as a team?

Tamara said "Well we like each other, we can work well sometimes, we are all smart and I think all of us care about each other."

Max added, "We know our customers and they like us a lot, we are pretty dependable, but there are so many missed opportunities, that's a weakness"

"Concentrate on the Opportunities", I prompted.

"Opportunities to make bigger deals we play our cards too close to the vest, if we were willing to partner more with a couple of our bigger customers we'd sell a heck of a lot more product and make much more profit. As a team we are way to conservative and suspicious"

"That's what you think", Michael jumped in, "but I know those people I've been doing business with them since before you were born, they are crooks, you can't get in bed with them how many times do I have to tell you that! This is exactly what I mean about being on the wrong page, your idea of good teamwork is to get in bed with a snake, no, we won't do it, we don't need a damn team to make stupid decisions, we need a team to do the right thing or we don't need a team at all!"

There was a long pause.

"That's a weakness" mumbled Jason.

"What is," I asked.

"We aren't really a team."

"Team members can disagree," I said.

"Yea, but whenever we disagree Michael does whatever he wants, where's the team in



that?”

“Is that true, Michael?” Michael looked at me, eyes narrowing and said “of course, what do you expect, its my money, it’s my company!” He spat out the last phrase and folded his arms, chin up looking at first me then the team then me again.

I said, “I think this is a good time for a break”, and quite suddenly Michael and I were seated alone at the table, the others hastily evaporated from Moose Hollow. We sat like two magnets pushing against each other yet unmoving.

“God damn it, I thought you knew what you were doing, this was a mistake!” and he got up and left me alone in the room.

Ten minutes later Leslie came into the Moose Hollow. Standing before me, her arms folded in what I was beginning to think was the company salute she said “Michael is very angry, Mr.Sutton. I think he is going to order us all home. He told me to talk to the hotel and see if we could get a refund, they’ve refused but he is talking to them himself, I’m sorry.” The lines at the side of her eyes deepened showing upset, without saying she was upset.

“Me too”, I said. “Why don’t we wait to see what happens.”

Her lips thinned in a hint of a smile and she said “Yes, he is a very intense individual.”

“What do you think I should do?”

She blinked and said “I don’t know”, shaking her head.

I walked out into the carpeted hallway, down the grand staircase to the lobby, looking for Michael. I found him by following the sound of his raised voice....

“Look you, I know the owners of this lodge, I know they will refund my money in a New York minute once they understand that I am dealing with an emergency here, we all have to get back to the office and I want our deposit back... now!” I looked into the office where Michael was pacing, strutting back and forth, delivering a scolding, arching his body as his voice rose in support of his case for this so called emergency. I waited for a pause and then asked him if he’d step outside for a moment. He blew me off and kept up his rant. The manager was not buying it though and finally with an exasperated “what is it” Michael bolted from the office taking me by the arm guiding me out the main lodge doors, down the steps out onto the driveway like a small child about to be punished for making a scene. I felt my anger rising to meet his. I pulled my arm away from him...”what emergency” I asked?

“I buy into your so called expertise about building a team and all I get is a big bill and insubordination. I’m not going to sit and listen to a bunch of no count dopes tell me how my business should be run, you understand? If that’s what a team is about I don’t want one. So let’s pack up and get out of here, we’re done.” I looked at him for several breaths and then he continued. “You made it sound so good, build a team, build for the future, what the hell was was I thinking?”

“Michael you stated clearly that your days weren’t long enough, that you couldn’t get everything done without some help. That’s what a team does, help and good teams help a lot.”

“Ah, bullshit. I’ve run this thing for years without any team or whatever and this little fiasco this morning has convinced me I don’t need one.”



“Really?”

“Really, and I don’t need to spend a bunch more damn money either, so on both counts, we are done, understand?”

“No, I don’t understand because you aren’t making any sense.”

“Not to you perhaps, but I am to me.”

“Did you get your deposit back?”

“Not yet, but I’ll get it, you’ll see.”

“What if you don’t?”

“I’ll be pissed, and I’ll tell anyone who will listen to me that you are a fake!”

“You said wanted your employees to work more effectively. You said you wanted a team to run the day to day so you could pull back some. You and I talked about the session beforehand, you paid the deposit, you chose the place and you showed up. Now you are going to walk away, probably not get your money back and everybody goes back to the office feeling like shit? You will have taken a perfectly workable session and exploded it with your petulance and bad leadership.”

“Just cutting my losses, tiger. You don’t last as long as I have in business and not know how to cut and run when you need to.”

“Cut and run because?”

“Because you are a fraud and this is bullshit.”

“Dad”?

Michael and I both turned to see Max descending the front stairs.

“Not now, Max”.

“Dad, we need to talk.”

“I said not now!” Then in a softer voice: “Look Max, I need to finish here so leave us alone for a couple of minutes will you?”

“Dad....” Max sighed, looked at me and said, “I need to talk to my dad.” Anxiety made Max look a lot like his father, older and younger versions of the same face looking at me, both pained.

“Sure”, I said and walked up the stairs, and heard Michael’s voice behind me interrupted by Max hissing “Dad your sick remember!”

Thirty minutes later we were again gathered in Moose Hollow. Michael was now at the head of the table, seated in the what had been my chair only half an hour ago. I sat with the others and we all looked down toward the head of the table at Michael. He spoke, seemingly happy, smiling, arms open and hands extended to us, his voice an unnatural robust baritone. “I think we need to try again, start over back at the place where Max here was talking about opportunities or strengths or whatever, start there again. I may have misunderstood some things, but I’m on board now, so go ahead... Walt go ahead, Max what was your point again?”

Max’s cheeks blossomed red and his forehead wrinkled with effort as he spoke: “I just thought we should consider partnering with some of our customers instead of treating all of them like the enemy, I know some of them are really difficult, but maybe we could just start with a couple of them and see what happens.”

Michael yelled over the top of Max’s last word: “Excellent Idea, Max” his voice boomed out startling me and bouncing against the far wall of moose pictures. “Walt why don’t



you put that up on the flip chart and get on with running this meeting. Here, sit here, this is your seat” he said as he rose from his chair and gestured with his hand for me to sit. As Michael moved down the table Leslie looked at Tamara, Tamara looked at Max who watched Michael’s passage down the table to an empty seat while passing behind Jason who hunched, glaring at the pile of papers neatly stacked in front of him. Starting then, and for the rest of the meeting Michael said very little, startlingly little. This is not to say he didn’t participate, he nodded, smiled, pointed, grunted, but his voice was absent. It felt a little like holding an open door while expecting a hurricane at any moment, tensing against the expected blow, but it never came.

In moose hollow the team began to take hold. Like uncertain rowers the strokes begin cutting into the water at the same time, pulls began to exert together, breathing increasing and that undeniable surge started to happen more regularly. The Plan began to take shape, the team were gaining confidence, Michael was like the cox egging the team along but not rowing, just encouraging and counting the stroke, fingering the band aid from time to time and counting the stroke. Two days later as we were wrapping up the last details of a great plan we all felt the magic, moose hollow was suddenly a special place where we had all shared a remarkable experience.

Tamara, stood, and reaching under the table took a box wrapped in yellow paper and bright red ribbon. She came to the head of the table and asked me to stand.

“This was just fantastic. We want to thank you by giving you this token, literally a token, a Klinket Talking Stick. We know you will use it wisely and we hope you remember us when you do. We couldn’t have done this without you.” And then she kissed me on the cheek, blue lips surprisingly warm. I hugged her and said “thank you” looking at each one of them, one by one and ceremoniously said “now let’s give Michael the biggest hand of all.” And they all clapped and Michael, flushed clapped back at them and smiled.

So here it sits, my talking stick. A keepsake from moose hollow. The bird perched on the frog frozen in dark wood tell me of Max going on to run the business with the team, Michael who was sick, but was able to retire for a while and how the team and the business grew, together. The talking stick whispers to me; “that was it”. Together, they convinced Michael to face their future, and as hard as it was for him to accept, he let go, and as he did they took hold.

Then they all said goodbye leaving this fine stick as roof positive that they were more than ready “for the next step” ..just like Michael wanted.

