

CHAPTER 1

Is This as Good as It Gets?

*The Broken Link between
Success and the
Status Quo*



Sitting at his kitchen table, surrounded by the management books that had always made him feel safe, John felt the hair rise on the back of his neck.

Until now, he hadn't paid much attention to the B-grade horror flick playing on late-night television on the counter. It was on for background noise, to keep him company as he read. Now, with all his senses on

red alert, John was acutely aware of how the actor's hands shook as he pushed open the door of the deserted house and took a tentative step inside.

There was something frighteningly familiar about the scene, John realized. But he couldn't put his finger on it. Suddenly, behind the actor, something moved in the darkness, and John's stomach lurched: *That guy on the screen*, he thought, *that's me*.

Annoyed with himself, John snapped off the set and tossed his takeout box into the trash. But, sitting alone in the quiet, he couldn't stop the thoughts filling his mind. *That's me. Going in where everyone else has failed, thinking I can save the day.*

John rubbed his eyes. He hadn't been sleeping well lately, with his mind all wrapped up in his job, and he was tired.

"Time to call it a night," he said out loud to no one. He flipped off the kitchen light and crossed the adjoining living room, pausing for a moment to admire the painting that dwarfed the small room: an enormous abstract artwork consisting of overlapping shades of blue. He'd bought it with his AXD Solutions signing bonus. It was much too big for his apartment; John had known that from the beginning. However, there was something about the undulating current of the piece that reminded him of a fast-flowing river. It radiated the energy that he had felt that day. Sometimes, when he studied it, he still felt enveloped, surrounded by millions of droplets of water flowing rapidly toward the same destination. But not tonight. Tonight, it just made him feel like he was drowning.

The thing was, his job—the one that he had dreamed of, the one that was the envy of all his college friends—was driving him insane. Of course, it hadn't always been this way. His enthusiasm and success in

graduate school had attracted attention early on. He hadn't even completed his MBA program when AXD Solutions, an eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the IT industry, came looking for him. Suddenly, he'd found himself on the fast track without even putting together a resume. His immediate and phenomenal success with Trenneth, his first client, had confirmed his status as the heir apparent within AXD.

During John's heady first six months with AXD, his dad, Tim, had been the only person with any reservations about the certainty of a very bright future for John. Tim had been a midlevel executive with a major airline for more than 20 years. Although he was proud of John's quick success, his experiences in the corporate world made him concerned. Tim had worked his way up through his company without the benefit of a degree, and the long hours and stress of his career had been hard on his psyche.

Once, when John was still a teenager at home, he had run in from a pickup game of basketball to find his dad fingering a new line on the wall where his parents marked their children's heights in permanent marker. The line was just about his dad's height. "Just checking to see how I'm measuring up, you know, if I've shrunk any," his father had joked. It wasn't until just recently that John had realized he might have been talking about his own fading career ambitions.

Looking back now, there were many signs through the years that his dad was discouraged by his job. Still, John had chosen to follow his father's footsteps into the corporate world.

I walked into the situation with my eyes wide open, John thought to himself. *Or did I?*

His phenomenal success with Trenneth had been followed by several projects where John had turned in solid but decidedly less-impressive performances. It

was on his three-year anniversary with the company that John had first realized that his star was already fading. Somehow, somewhere along the way, he had lost the passion and was worried his work was sliding into mediocrity. In desperation, during his most recent project, he'd turned to his old college textbooks, studying late into the night in search of what was missing.

What was he missing? John's eyes scanned the surface of the painting, as if searching for an answer, but he soon found he was too tired to rehash it all tonight. His mind jogged erratically back to the horror movie. *Why don't the guys in these movies ever turn on the lights?* he asked himself. Now, that was an easier question. *Maybe because they're afraid of what they'll see.*

John froze. The thought was unexpected and jarring—and seemed to somehow imply something unflattering about his personal situation. Rather than deal with it, he hit the wall switch and the living room went dark.

"Pardon me," the woman next to John bumped his chair as she settled into her seat. He'd been early; the first one at the one o'clock managers meeting; but now the room was filling up fast. Someone passed him an agenda.

John remembered how he used to love these meetings when he was on the Trenneth project; there were so many exciting things to report. Today, his turn to report would take maybe thirty seconds, max. His small development team was holding its own. Right on schedule. Nothing to be ashamed of, yet he was embarrassed. He hated that there was nothing spectacular happening with his group. On the upside, he could pretty much zone out during the meeting. As usual, the pressure would be on the managers whose projects were in trouble.

He scanned the report. Cheryl was up first. Her team was at least a month behind on the Mentec project, and there were red dots all over her Gantt chart, not good. He scanned the faces around the table. Dave. Jay. Brent. Andrew. Michelle. Phil. But no Cheryl. *I'd be hiding out, too*, thought John. *No, no I wouldn't*, he corrected himself. *I'd be killing myself to get that software out the door.*

John was still lost in thought when Kaye, the regional vice president, came into the room at a calculated ten minutes past the hour. When John looked up, she caught his eye and greeted him personally, although he was seated four seats down from her.

"Hi, John. Glad to see your projects are on schedule. I hear good things about you," she said, talking over the heads of several other managers.

It was a compliment, but he felt his guts freeze up momentarily. Who had been saying good things? His clients? Had she spoken with his clients? Usually she only did that once a year, just before performance appraisals, and that was via a written survey. What was up?

"We won't wait for Cheryl. But there are some problems in her area," Kaye addressed the group. "We're 640 man hours behind schedule on Mentec's deliverable. The deadline is in 90 days and we've got to punch production up to meet it. I've heard there have been some problems with sales adding additional requirements that have slowed the development cycle. Mike, can you give me sales' perspective?"

At the question, everyone's eyes took on a faraway look. Some stared down at the agenda in a vague sort of way. They all knew this could take a while. Mentally, John tried to track the conversation, although it was hard. It was after lunch, and he'd heard it all a million times before. The blame game was on.

Blah, blah, blah, blah. Something about the customer constantly changing the target. Blah, blah, blah. The customer is completely unreasonable. Yada, yada, yada. They say what we're creating isn't what they pictured and described. Blah, blah, blah, blah. The programmers can't seem to get it right. Blah, blah. Blah, blah. More complaints about the programmers. Something, something, something. Maybe we should turn it over to a new project manager. Blah, blah, blah.

Wait!

John looked around, startled. Had he said that out loud? Apparently not. No one was reacting. Next to him, Dave continued slowly filling the margins of his progress report with spirals . . . and rather gruesome skulls and tombstones. Was everyone in the room mentally checked out? Hadn't they heard that last part?

For the rest of the meeting, John was acutely aware of what was said. The first round of the blame game was declared a tie and the topic was tabled after a 35-minute tangent into the pros and cons of outsourcing to programmers in India. Round two centered around the declining sales of an internally produced accounting software product. All this was followed by a cursory discussion about upcoming HR open enrollment featuring reductions in PTO benefits, the summer party in August at a local amusement park, and some efficiency training. And then it was over. John looked at his watch. They had finished in just under two hours—a miracle! Managers meetings sometimes ran until dark.

As he pushed his seat back, Kaye called to him. "John, I'd like to meet with you in my office in ten minutes. Are you free?"

The VP's office was bright, full of brushed aluminum wall panels and uncomfortable, modern armchairs. It was the kind of place John pictured himself

occupying someday. As she wrapped up a phone call, John calmed his nerves by visualizing how his painting of blue currents would look on the wall next to her desk.

On the phone, Kaye watched him as his eyes scanned the room, the one it had taken her years to earn. *Cool your jets, kiddo*, she thought, as the vendor on the phone launched into his best pitch. *You have to pay your dues—and then wait for me to move up into a corner office on the fourth floor.* She smiled. John grinned back.

Hanging up, Kaye excused herself for a moment to talk to her assistant. When she came back, she sat behind her desk instead of taking the chair next to John. *Remind him who's boss*, she thought.

"It's been a good couple of years for you," Kaye began. "First Trenneth, then AmSen. Both solid deliveries. Now Sun Disk and TCG are going well." She leaned back in her chair and flicked her pen lightly on the side of her leather chair. "People are talking about the fast track and you being the next Blaine Mukai." As she said it, her eyes searched his face.

John hardly knew how to respond. The words were positive. But, somehow, the way she said it didn't come across that way.

What could he say? He shifted in his chair. "Well, I—"

"Here's the deal," Kaye interrupted. "Cheryl has left the company. Not voluntarily. You heard about the problems with Mentec. They're ready to go with another vendor. That's how bad it's gotten."

"But we haven't missed the drop-dead date," said John. "We've suffered a few setbacks, and they're packing their bags?"

Kaye continued. "The delays have them nervous, sure, but it's more than that. They say we aren't responsive to their needs. They didn't work well with Cheryl."

“We—the CEO and COO were in on this one—want you to take over the account,” she said. “They are impressed by your talent, creativity, and energy. ‘Youthful energy,’ were their exact words, I think. We need someone who’s fearless—willing to take on a wide breadth of problems and drive results. We can’t afford to lose this client. You’re the guy.”

John was speechless. Six months ago, he would have been salivating over this kind of project, a chance to showcase what he really could do. Now, he wasn’t so sure. There was a metallic taste in his mouth, a symptom of the adrenaline now surging through his system. *So, what’s it going to be? Fight or flight?* he asked himself.

“Okay. What about Sun Disk and TCG?”

“Small-time stuff. We’ll have someone else finish your other projects. Mentec is huge for us.”

“Okay.” He paused and rubbed his hand through his hair. “Tell me where to start.”

“I knew you’d be up to the challenge,” she said, “so I had my assistant put this packet together for you. It’ll bring you up to date. We’ve got four people on this project. Ray Edvik, your senior consultant, can walk you through things. You know Ray; he’s in the cube bank next to your team. Get started, then we can meet back here in a few days to discuss any questions you’ve come up with.”

She stood to shake his hand and walked him to the door. Returning to her desk, Kaye wondered if she’d done the right thing. *For the sake of the company—oh, let’s be honest, for the sake of my own career—I need him to succeed. But not too well. I know what happens to young executives who experience wild success: They replace regional vice presidents like me.*

The next day was a blur. John said goodbye to his trusted team members and introduced himself to a

new group of four relative strangers: Ray Edvik, a senior guy with ten-plus years under his belt put in at several firms (John didn't recall ever meeting him before); Blake, a seven-year veteran; Kiki, a junior programmer with a couple of years experience, all at AXD Solutions; and Todd, the graphics guy.

Putting everyone on autopilot for the moment, John immersed himself in the Mentec project. Using reports and memos, John traced the slow decline of Cheryl's group from confident enthusiasm, through hopeful rewrites, and, finally, to the last client conference call, which, by all accounts, had been a train wreck. Mike, AXD's sales director, laid it out for him in gruesome detail when John ran into him in the hallway on Tuesday.

"So, after three hours on a conference call going nowhere, Cheryl finally tells Mentec that we aren't going to make any more changes, period," Mike had told John in whispers during the impromptu hallway meeting. "She says legally we're in compliance with the original contract, and that's it."

Although John hadn't said a word, Mike must have read something in his face. Mike ran his hand across his bald head and sighed. "All I can say is, hey, look, we've got people here who can sell ice to Eskimos, but none of them can figure Mentec out. Even my best people can't make any headway."

By Wednesday, John had come to two conclusions: The product not only appeared to meet every one of the customer's specifications but surpass them, and, for some indefinable reason, Mentec hated it.

There's got to be a way to do this, John thought to himself for the millionth time. *We've got to get into the heads of the people at Mentec and figure out—*

The thought was interrupted by a knock at his office door.

“Got a moment?” Ray cracked the door and poked his head around. He was a big man in his late forties, who (so far, anyway) wore a different-colored Polo golf shirt to work every day, always with dark blue khakis.

“Just wanted to see if you have any questions so far on the project. Kiki’s code can be a little rough. I have to nurse her along a little sometimes. She’s still getting the hang of it all.”

John hadn’t noticed any quality differences in their work, but it made him question Kiki’s abilities: *What were Kiki’s skills? Was part of the delay caused by Ray having to cover for her?*

Long after Ray had left his office, John was still wondering about his people. His thoughts were disturbed by a loud growl; his stomach was complaining. He glanced down at his watch; It was two o’clock. He needed to take a break. *What had Stephanie said her day would be like today?* He tried to remember. As a busy event planner, his girlfriend’s schedule was even more nuts than his. He speed-dialed his number one.

“Hey, Steph, want to grab a late lunch? We can get some Thai.”

Thirty minutes later, sitting in the bright and ornate surroundings of their favorite restaurant, John looked over at Stephanie and felt himself relax a little. She smiled, waiting for him to fill her in on the latest. They had been dating for about two years now, and the Thai Café was where they always came when things got a little out of control. It was their secret smoke signal for distress.

The place was perfect. Always busy, yet never frantic. The waitresses treated them like family, looking up and smiling whenever they arrived. It was corny, but John and Stephanie even had a favorite table tucked into a little alcove.

The waitress took their order and, as she walked away, Stephanie noticed three men in business suits passing their table.

“John,” she said. “That man being seated, with the orange tie. Isn’t he your client from Trenneth?” She had been introduced to Mr. Jackson at a corporate reception she’d attended with John a couple years ago, and she’d been struck by how well he and John had seemed to hit it off.

“It is!” John was already pushing back his chair. “Give me just one minute,” he said, holding up a finger. “I want to say hello.”

From the table she watched Mr. Jackson’s surprise, followed by his obvious pleasure in seeing John again. He asked John something, and John shook his head, motioning her way. She waved and smiled. During a pause in the pleasant hum of conversation around her, she heard Jackson tell his companions loudly, “This is the guy who transformed warehousing for us.” As John said goodbye, Jackson stood and shook John’s hand with both of his.

John returned to the table with lifted spirits. The spicy food reenergized him. And Stephanie helped him to refocus. As they left the restaurant, Stephanie couldn’t help but laugh at the magic of the place. As usual, a trip to the Thai Café had transformed them.

John got back to the office just minutes before his first staff meeting with his new group and was pleasantly surprised to find he was excitedly anticipating it. The team’s war room, really just a table and some mismatched chairs in an open area, was located clear on the other side of the building, next to his group’s printer. To get to it, you had to pass through a graveyard of several empty cubes, each with a broken chair and dusty old monitor. *Why don’t we just get rid of all this junk?* he wondered.

He stopped on the way to the meeting to ask Ray to bring along a Gantt chart of part of the project—something that was missing from the documentation—so that the group could assess what came next. There were some parts of the project marked completed that hadn't made it to testing yet, and the flowchart of the project was sketchy at best.

Ray wasn't there; but he noticed Kiki in her cube, punching away at a keyboard. He poked his head into the cube.

"Hey, you coming to the meeting? I was hoping to get started in about three minutes."

She looked up and smiled. "Yeah, sure. I just had to reboot my computer. It froze up again."

Kiki got up and walked with John to the war room. She didn't say much as he made small talk about the weather, and he noticed that her knuckles, clutching a yellow legal pad, were white.

Ray was talking loudly as they joined the rest of the group already there. Ray was going on and on about parsing code. Todd might have been listening, but it was hard to tell. He was leaning back, with his long, lanky legs stretched out in front of him, staring at the ceiling with a frown. Blake was on a cell phone, one finger in his ear to block out Ray's booming voice. As John and Kiki sat down, he ended the call. All eyes locked in on the boss.

Well, might as well just dive right in, he thought.

"I don't know how much you know about what's happened over the past few days in response to Mentec's concerns, other than that Cheryl has left the company," John began. "Let's just start by saying that this is the group that will finish the project . . . on time and to specifications."

John had spent a lot of time formulating this first statement. He wanted to reassure the group that no

one else was leaving, but also communicate the challenge at hand. It had the desired effect on Kiki. She smiled and visibly relaxed.

“I have some questions that I hope you can answer.”

In short order, John had learned that no one on the staff had ever spoken with anyone at Mentec; that was Cheryl’s job. They had never seen the overall project Gantt chart, either. No one was really sure what the next step was. And no one had any idea of their deadlines.

“Cheryl just gave us a new piece of the project as we finished something,” offered Kiki apologetically.

John was particularly amazed to discover that, although everyone had known there were some problems, no one (except possibly Ray) had understood how extensive they were until Cheryl left.

“I calculate that we’ve spent roughly one month, that’s 640 man hours, on rewrites,” said John. “But we haven’t fixed the problem yet? What’s going on?”

“Look, these people are never happy,” said Ray. “I built them a Porsche and they’d rather have a go-kart, that’s what. They don’t know what’s good for them. Cheryl, and even Mike, could never get them to come around to it.”

“Come around to what?” asked John.

“That we’ve given them a better product than they ever imagined,” said Ray.

“It is a pretty slick piece of software,” agreed Kiki, quietly.

“They’re technologically stunted over there,” Ray said. “They have trouble with even the simplest things. Need us to hold their hands through everything. The problem isn’t with the software, it’s with them. They just don’t get it.”

John nodded. This was interesting, but complicated. He’d have to sort through it later. For now, he had other questions.

“Kiki, I can’t find two pieces of the project that you’ve indicated are completed. They should be ready for Todd, but they’re not.”

Kiki looked at Ray. “Well, Ray must still have them, right, Ray?” she asked.

“Ray?” repeated John, dumbfounded. “Why?” *Maybe Ray was really having to doctor Kiki’s work.*

“He—” started Kiki, but Ray interrupted.

“When Cheryl was here, she had me review Kiki’s code before it went to testing,” he said. “I’ve been buried, but I’ll get on it.”

John thought fast. *This would be a chance to see how Kiki’s work looks fresh from the keyboard, before Ray has tidied things up.*

“Why don’t you just send it over to me? I’ll take care of it this time,” said John. “That will free you up a little.”

“No, you don’t know the project yet,” said Ray, gruffly. “I’m the only one who really does, now that Cheryl’s gone.”

John was surprised by his resistance. He glanced at Kiki, who had stopped fingering her spiky dark hair and was doing her best impersonation of the invisible woman, trying to be tinier than she already was.

“Don’t worry, I’m a quick learner. Just shoot it over today,” John said, “and I’ll look at it over the long weekend.”

He paused a moment, expecting an answer. Ray starred at him stonily.

I guess I’ll take that as a yes, thought John. What’s his problem, anyway?

Turning to look at Kiki, John said, “It’s a long weekend, starting on Friday, and maybe the last real weekend any of us will see for a while, if we’re going to meet the final deadline—and I really believe we still can—so enjoy it.”

There was the sound of scraping chairs as everyone got up to leave.

“Oh, what about the speed-reading training next week?” asked Kiki, turning around. “Is it still on?”

“Speed reading?” John hated that he kept sounding like an echo. “I haven’t heard anything about it.” *Speed reading? Where in the world did that come from?*

“It’s some corporate efficiency deal,” said Todd, with a sarcastic laugh. “It’s supposed to boost our productivity.”

“It was scheduled a long time ago,” added Kiki.

“We don’t have time for that right now,” said John, clearly shocked by the whole idea.

“When has that ever stopped anything from happening around here?” Todd smirked. “It’s the AXD way.”

John spent most of Thursday preparing for his Monday phone call with the client. It was the linchpin; he just had to find a way to make the customer see what a great product they were getting and stop all these games.

By the end of the day, he was ready to hit the road. Literally. He’d been promising his parents he would come and see their new home on the coast for weeks—well, months, actually—and with a long weekend and the promise of nothing but overtime on the horizon, he had to finally make good on that promise.

I guess I’m lucky to be getting out of the city this weekend. I really need to unwind. He signed on to his computer to look for the code he requested from Ray. It wasn’t there.

Automatically, he wondered if Ray had forgotten on purpose. On the way to Ray’s cube, he ran into Kiki. She looked like she was headed out for the weekend.

“Hey, boss,” she said brightly, then seeing his expression, she looked worried. “Something wrong?”

“No. It’s just I need to talk to Ray about something,” he said.

“Uh,” Kiki hesitated. “That could be a problem. He left about an hour ago.”

Driving out of the city, John was still annoyed with Ray. No, with the whole situation. There was just so much working against him: an impossible-to-read customer, never-ending rewrites, a passive-aggressive employee. Add on a company that was mired in tradition and hierarchy—and speed-reading classes, believe it or not—and he’d sound just like his dad during one of his diatribes about the problems with AXD Solutions. He rolled all the windows down to clear his head.

He hit the bridge in record time. He loved this part of the drive, speeding over the water. By then, the fresh air had begun to work its magic and he’d started to entertain the thought that although this project clearly wouldn’t be his brightest moment, perhaps it didn’t have to be a complete disaster.

His cell rang.

“So, you’re off to see the folks, huh?” said Stephanie’s voice. “How are you going to handle your dad?”

Stephanie knew that his dad loved talking shop—especially during the last five years, as Tim’s business career had finally begun to take off. His team was growing so rapidly, in fact, that he had actually begun hinting about John joining the airline. Not that John was totally against the idea; he just wasn’t sure about his dad’s radical new management ideas.

Tim might call his decision to change direction at work an epiphany; but John wondered if it wasn’t more of a breakdown. *It must be what, five years now since he learned about that value-something-or-other management*, John thought. Ever since then, his dad

wanted to know all about John's latest assignments—and share his concerns about AXD. John resisted these discussions. He didn't want to be rude to his father, but he also didn't want to engage him on the topic of work and hear his lecture on how he would address the problem or the concern.

"I'm not going to get into it," John said, finally. "We'll talk about his golf game."

"Good call," she said. He could tell she was a little distracted.

"Well, I gotta run," she said, lowering her voice a little. "The boss just arrived. I just wanted to wish you luck. Have a great time."

They said goodbye, and John mentally reviewed his game plan for avoiding his dad's difficult questions about his assignment: He would put the best spin on work and the new role, emphasizing what the CEO and COO had said about his "young energy" and leave it at that. He had hoped to spend a little time this weekend looking at Kiki's code, but he had brought along some of his college management textbooks instead.

He rolled the windows back up and turned up the radio. All he needed to relax was a weekend at home.

Or so he thought.

