

They entered the room in an orderly stream, dressed in identical ill-fitting slacks and white polos, milling about, chatting, laughing. The conversations centred on current projects, the frustrating software updates, or the layoffs, can you believe the layoffs, nobody saw it coming, well maybe some of us did, the signs were there. A boy, at least half-a-head shorter than anyone else, lingered in the outskirts of the conversations, smiling at the appropriate moments, his eyes betraying his sincerity.

At the front of the room, a group of 4 people stood next to a large screen. “Quarterly UAT Update: KPIs and Next Steps”, (size 36 Times New Roman, Eerie Black font) was projected on the left side of the screen; the words “Holo Management Training Cohort - Section 4A” were aligned neatly underneath (size 18 Times New Roman, Charcoal Black font), and a logo, the same logo embroidered on the left breast of their white polos, took up the right side of the screen.

The room had a sterile quality: smooth surfaces terminating in orthogonal angles, 12 perfectly proportioned tables – 4 rows of 3 – forming a precise triangular lattice; every colour in the room a hueless black, white or grey; every glossy surface a model of specular perfection, free of clutter. The two entrances to the room faced each other on opposing walls, the location of their respective door handles creating a displeasing symmetry; however, this was rectified by a merely cutting the mirror axis diagonally across the room, through the door handles, and the design was thus deemed acceptable by the original architects. The room was capacious and empty, like a furniture store at a closing down sale. Small trappings had been added, at great consternation to management: a Kanban board with 15 rows, 5 columns (“Requested, Planning, In Progress, In Review, Complete”), adorned with white post-it notes, a thick 3-ring binder on a countertop, a Holo poster with a smiling family in a forest clearing.

A man excused himself from the group, and stepped forward. He was taller than his peers, and the top button of his collared shirt – Ivory White, wrapped in a Harris Tweed blazer – was undone; unlike the others, he was not wearing a tie. He had a full head of well-coiffed salt and pepper hair, a friendly face and a warm smile, like you could see yourself getting a beer with him, though no one could ever remember getting a beer with him, or socializing in any way outside of company-sanctioned events. The noise level persisted, but there was a shift in tone and urgency as the groups began to drift apart, individuals finding their seats. The boy found his way to one of the tables and caught the man’s eye, who responded with a quick smile, his eyes unmoving.

Once everyone was seated, the man raised his hand, and the voices decayed away.

“Good morning. How *is* everyone today?”

A few murmurs.

“Fantastic, really great to hear. Well, we are happy to announce our 3-year Strategic Plan has been approved by the Board of Directors. We’ve had to touch base quite frequently to

finalize the Strategic Plan, and most of the quarterly Board meeting last week was spent hashing out the details. We would really like to thank them for their hard work on this; so we really owe them a huge debt of gratitude for their dedication to this task. Now we –”

The group standing behind him began applauding enthusiastically.

“ – yes, let’s thank them.”

Polite applause followed. A girl tilted her head and briefly looked at her shoe. The boy, at the next table, glanced over. He saw an unremarkable black clog. He looked at the girl, whose attention was back on the presentation. He looked at her shoe again. Just a shoe.

“Now we all know our goal here at Holo is to contribute in a positive way“, he continued. “As such, the strategic plan is centred around 3 institutional goals: Integrity, Sustainability, Diversity. These are the foundational principles through which we will base our decisions for the next 3 years. Now we have determined 3 KPIs for each Pillar of our strategic plan, which I will outline briefly for you now.”

(The organisational psychologists had suggested using Rules of Three for developing the Strategic Plan, as the human brain is able to process information in a more natural and aesthetically pleasing way in threes).

The next slide came up.

“First, Integrity. To do good, we need to ensure transparent processes within the organisation; that our products are able to withstand the rigorous processes approved by our internal inspectors and ensure the products we release into the world continue to be a model of corporate exigency.”

The words on the slide exactly matched the words coming out of his mouth, like a ball bouncing over the lyrics on a karaoke screen; he matched the tempo perfectly. He clicked to the next slide.

“ Transparency starts with all of you: ensuring you are transparent in your processes, your interactions with each other, and your interactions with all of our stakeholders.”

Next slide.

“Next we have Sustainability. To do good, we must ensure our organisation continues on the current path to success, as measured by our internal quality indicators...and finally we must consider the present, the world that we are currently part of, so that we are sustainable in that, uh, regard.”

The Holo Centre for Education was one of the 16 buildings making up the 290 acre corporate campus of Holo Incorporated. The dense boreal forest that used to be here, once home to 13 different tree species – including a 43-metre tall Eastern White Pine that was at least 350 years old – had been rightsized to make room for the campus, the surrounding worker settlements, the roads, the power infrastructure and the light-rail networks. A few pines remained, scattered around the campus at strategic intervals, such that at least one tree was visible from each window on every building on the campus; the organizational psychologists had demanded this concession to environmental ergonomics; studies have consistently shown that being in nature increases worker well-being and productivity.

“And finally, diversity: To make everlasting and eternal change in our world, we must value diverse perspectives here at Holo. We’re a family, and the diverse perspectives from each and every person in our organisation are what make our family strong. We must continue to make efforts to ensure that we are inclusive of those who are not part of our family.”

The boy’s attention wavered, his right knee jangling up and down rapidly. He thought of sunlight. The previous day, he had gone on a day trip to a nature reserve, a 2 hour drive, with his parents. His father, keenly aware of the value-add of quality time since the diagnosis, had asked for, and was granted, permission for each of them to take the day off, although he had had to use one of his own work-release days for Poppa, as he had run through his own release days battling the encephalopathy, holes opening in every region of his brain wrought by years of exposure to industrial waste – a byproduct of a small chemical reaction, step 4 of 47 in the manufacturing process – that he had no direct involvement with as part of his job: the fumes had seeped through a poorly designed air-filtration system and into the neighbouring building, where he was desk-bound all those years. The company would later settle with the families of all 28 victims for \$18.2 million, the compensation for each family depending on the level of exposure, as determined by negotiations between the family’s medical representatives and the company, although the company did not admit to any wrongdoing as a condition of the settlement. The boy and his father received \$249,000 as part of the settlement: equivalent to 4 years of Poppa’s salary, as determined by his average annual salary over the last 5 years of his life.

Next slide.

“...as we move forward to reach our projected...”

Next slide.

“...for the 4th consecutive year, our team...”

Next slide.

The presentation continued. The audience, seated 5 per table at each of the 12 tables, seemed restless. They fidgeted, turned their heads, crossed and uncrossed their ankles, in absolute silence. At least one stared intently at the ceiling directly above them.

Next.

“You are all valued stakeholders of Holo, and we are grateful for your contributions as we continue to disrupt the enterprise-adapting optimization service industry.”

“Now I’d like to hand things over to Benjamin, one of the fellow members of Holo Management Training Cohort - Section 4A, who will outline some data related to our efficiency goals, and how we can leverage this to improve the related processes”.

He stepped away from the podium and clapped as he looked towards the boy. Applause again lolled from the audience as the boy stood up and strolled to the front of the room. The boy shook the man’s hand, and took the presentation clicker. He turned to face the rest of the audience.

“Ok, uh, yes, thank you all for being here, it’s nice to see some recognizable faces.”

The faces showed no signs of recognition.

“As mentioned, I’m going to focus specifically on processes, and how we can leverage improvements to the processes to improve metrics across our board. So first of all we’d like to, we’d like to, um...like to....um, am I, is this...?”

The boy clicked the little pod in his hand a few times but the screen remained unchanged. His slacks bunched near his ankles, at least 3 full folds; he was at least a year or two younger than the rest of the cohort. He had been pushed ahead due to his strong leadership qualities and attention-to-detail: he had recently tested highly in the Abstract Reasoning and Empathy Instruments, higher than anyone in the Holo Section 4 Management cohort in over 17 years, in fact. Upstairs, they believed he had potential to be, at minimum, a full-scale disruptor, and were steering him towards a position in Macro-Risk Analysis; worst-case scenario, he’d make a fine Improvement-Control Monitor.

“OK, thanks,” he said as he successfully progressed to the next slide. “As I was saying, I wanted to take a deep dive into some of the business efficiency metrics with you,” he continued, pronouncing “efficiency” with a velar stop, a hard “k” in the middle so it sounded like *effik-and-see*. “We’ll start first with an individual metric ...”

The audience bristled, their childlike fidgeting amplified as they watched their peer present to them. There were 16 slides in the deck, each containing at least 3 points (Rules of Three, as previously mentioned; on occasion a fourth point was added, but never more than 5, as this would dilute the impact of each point). This was his first presentation as a Process

Development Mentor and there was a lot to keep track of: read the content on the slides in an engaging way (methodically, with the proper inflection at the correct points), understand the content deeply (proactively prepare for any questions, even though questions were not allowed), give off the correct amount of authority. In rehearsals, a repeated criticism was that he “smiled too much” – a nervous tic – so his attention was fractured, a substantial part devoted to controlling his facial muscles in order to give off a serious, neutral – but simultaneously friendly and approachable – tone.

“As we continue to optionize, uh optimize, our goals, we will see a benefit – the benefits lasting through our First and Second...”

The boy hesitated. A man’s face, cragged and familiar, had appeared in the door window. He caught the eye of the boy speaking and gave him a thumbs-up. A small smile – a nervous tic – from the boy.

“...through our First and Second Quarters”.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the face was gone, the window now solely enclosing a Slate Gray, faux-brick wall.

There was scant wildlife to see at the nature reserve – squirrels, chipmunks, sparrows, a brief glimpse of a red-tailed hawk– but they had enjoyed it nonetheless. They hiked along a wide trail enclosed on all sides by yew trees and St John’s Wort and mossy rocks – pausing here and there for Poppa to inspect something a branch more closely, or stop to listen for faint bird call that he had heard but the others did not – and then the trail narrowed imperceptibly as they walked until they they walked single file, thin branches tugging at their clothes and finally up a shallow incline where the path cleared and a curtain was drawn: a waterfall, green-tinted water cascading over a staircase of dolomite, uncountable molecules crashing down each step, and they thought of the boy, of Ben, as a toddler, rumbling down each step on his bottom, his giggles impulsively rising on impact. The water battered the soft stone; in 2.3 million years the staircase would be gone, in its stead a sheer 30-foot drop, the destructive power hidden in this snapshot of time. Their attention softened, and a discordant symphony played around them: the turbulent water; the leaves rubbing each other’s palms; a distant bird of prey song. On the way home, they would get ice cream, and make it back to watch the sun set, Benjamin drifting off against Poppa’s shoulder, and looking across their barren backyard, the perfectly symmetrical buildings beyond, the twilight pinks and orange and purples coating our sight, each colour vying for our attention.

“...as we have the opportunity to cinder-gize with other divisions, rightsizing some of the efforts in the process.”

The next slide that came up said “Thank you”, and the audience began to applaud once again.

The man rushed towards the boy and reached down to shake his hand. The man and the boy would work closely together for many years, as the boy himself grew into a man, becoming the industry disruptor they all imagined he would become; they would never drink a beer together.

“Alright, that’s the end of the current session; we’ll take a quick 10 and then break off into working groups to discuss the EquityCirc software alignment strategy.”

The room quickly emptied out; childish giggles, screams, fading as a stream of children trickled out the door. The boy – Benjamin – was swept up in the stream, countable molecules crashing through the door, searching for a resting place. They walked out into the hallway and they kept walking until they were out the door, out into the world, past the remaining trees and they kept walking, you couldn’t even see them anymore, just their voices, laughing, chatting, and they kept walking, now deep into the forest, their voices now a whisper, you couldn’t even hear them anymore and then they were gone.