

# Chapter 1

## Hot drinks

### LESSON LEARNT

#### - CONSULTING IS ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

The first thing every good consultant needs to know is that relationships will be central to their success. It is true an individual will not last long if they cannot do their job. Success, however, is more likely when others support them by sharing expertise, information, opportunities or their own resources.

In a career it is never too early to start building connections; a shared history is powerful. Remember reputations stick, a part of which is the image the consultant chooses to cultivate.

When forming a new relationship, the good consultant should start by establishing rapport and getting to know the other person. Over time they will seek to build trust.

**9:25am, Monday 7th April**

*Cosy.* That was the thought in Don's head as he picked up his americano and took a sip. It was called a long black here, but he knew what it was, and it was good. More importantly, it was what was needed. Sighing in relief, he slouched back slightly, the wrinkles across his craggy pale features and in the corners of his eyes softening slightly.

*Too cosy?* The corner spot felt like a booth, the oversized fabric chairs, vaguely resembling thrones sat over a tiny round table that had proven to be extremely stable on a previous occasion. It was positioned behind a low banister, parallel to the glass window front and opposite to where the door was. Don's preferred location for working breakfasts and coffees, but it was perhaps too intimate for the discussion about to happen.

Glancing about as he picked up his coffee again, he noted the six other customers scattered about, all in pairs. Two older men in their fifties or sixties were dressed as smartly as Don in suits, one with a tie and one without, the other four in trendy comfortable outfits. All were deep enough in their conversations that, whilst a flock of sheep being driven through would probably have attracted their notice, no one would have looked up if the local beverage drinking population suddenly tripled. Artist's Symphony was the definition of a business cafe. Warm, comfortable wooden tables well-spaced, with a hint of age about them but clearly new and immaculately presented. The well-spaced portraits of famous composers and painters against textured grey walls finished the scene.

He already knew the time but glanced at his phone to check anyway. Given the office entrance was next door and the rain was dying out, there was no reason for his colleague to be early. The ghost of a smile crossed his face at the irony as he unconsciously twisted his wedding ring slowly between his right thumb and forefinger. He was here already despite being the one who had hesitated about a Monday morning meeting. Not that morning

meetings were bad normally. It was more he had flown back late last night from France and, after a draining weekend, felt he had not really woken up yet.

Taking a larger sip, Don saw Ryan through the glass hurry past him towards the door, push it open and step inside. His youthful round face was flushed, which might have been linked to the combination of shirt and thick jumper showing beneath his half open green rain jacket. The outfit also helped offset his somewhat overweight figure. With a pointed hand signal Ryan showed the front-of-house he was meeting Don and hurried over.

“Sorry I’m late,” Ryan said as he tried to pull the chair out at the same time as taking off his jacket. “Guess I didn’t need this but it was raining earlier. Sorry.”

Finally succeeding in moving the chair and getting his coat off, he settled in and swiped a hand through his untamed black hair, before pushing the seat ever so slightly further back.

“You’re on time, maybe I should apologise for being early,” Don joked, presenting a friendly demeanour and speaking evenly in his home counties accent. “What would you like? It’s on me.”

The same waiter from the door was stood over the pair wearing an inoffensive smile, having timed his stroll to perfection.

“Latte please. No, flat white. Actually latte. Yes, latte please.”

“Latte. And anything else for you?” the waiter asked Don.

“All good here, thanks Jon,” Don replied evenly.

The nervousness in his companion and a twinge of guilt made him realise this meeting was overdue. They had been working together for four weeks now and he could barely think of two comments Ryan had made in any of their meetings beyond work. That was why he had suggested a casual coffee.

After the obligatory joke about the weather and whether spring would show its face anytime soon, Don thought it was time to get into it.

“I wanted to sit down to give us a chance to get to know each other. You have been doing solid work and it would be useful to

understand what your longer-term goals are so that I can help if and when there's an opportunity.”

Ryan hesitated for a second and a tiny bit of tension seemed to go out of his shoulders.

“Thank you. To be honest I was thinking you might just want to fire me from the project. Erm, I mean there's lots to do but we've not really spoken, you and me.”

The words came through plainly in his slightly cockney accent. The unsaid was pretty clear too.

“There's loads we need to get done over the next three months,” Don replied, then with a grin added, “we couldn't roll you off even if I wanted to. Besides, Joanna would kill me.”

Ryan grinned back at that unlikely but also colourful scenario.

Joanna was the engagement lead and Ryan's day-to-day boss whilst he was assigned to the project. He had a different line manager who dealt with year-end reviews and pay matters; matrix management was the standard in the industry.

Overall responsibility for the project sat with Don. Joanna both reported into him for the project, but he was also her line manager, or 'mentor guide' to use the latest consulting lingo bingo. Sometimes that was the dream, one boss and point of accountability; the case for the two of them. In others it was a nightmare, with no way to escape or anyone to escalate working issues to.

Taking a larger sip to enjoy the coffee before it went from pleasantly hot to warm, Don went on.

“There's some feedback here for me, and maybe for you too. It's taken us way too long to have this sit down. We both know how important relationships are in this business, so why has it taken almost a month to find half an hour for a coffee? Perhaps because it didn't seem necessary or we've been so busy since you joined the project; that is why we needed you to bolster the team, after all.”

He went on. “However, I'm going to put my hands up and say that is an easy excuse rather than a real reason. If you feel the same way, what would you say to starting to change that, here and now?”

With Ryan's enthusiastic agreement, the pair shared a bit about their backgrounds and what had brought them into consulting. It turned out they had read the same subject at their respective universities and shared a passion for cricket. Most people would find something in common if they looked hard enough. A good first step for building rapport.

The conversation soon veered back to the project. Ryan's eagerness was clear but his freely shared thoughts about the direction of travel were more short-sighted than Don had expected. It was not relevant to the conversation directly. One to tuck away for later.

"My job on the project is to help you and the rest of the team," Don said as he waved a credit card towards Jon, smiling broadly at the waiter as an unrelated thought entered his mind. "Don't hesitate to ask even if I seem busy, and I'll also think about ways to get you more involved in some bids if that's the experience you want to get."

"Cheers." There was genuine gratitude in Ryan's voice, his confidence boosted by Don's broad smile. "Can I grab these?"

"Like I said, my shout." Jon came over with the card reader. Tapping plastic against the keypad without looking, Don added, "Happy for you to return the favour next time though."

"Definitely!"

Climbing out of the chairs and fumbling with jackets, Don preceded Ryan out and onto the still wet stone outside. They covered the twenty metres between the café's exit and the entrance to their office building quickly, grateful the rain had not restarted. Ryan's scuffed sneakers clashed somewhat with Don's highly polished brown Oxfords.

They both worked at FGTT, a consultancy that had grown to the point that three years ago the founders' names had been shortened to an acronym of their initials. The London office in Pancras Square was new, and it also served as the UK and global headquarters. Excellent was the only way to describe its design and facilities. Spread over seven floors, there were so many meeting rooms and break out spaces that one was almost always free. Every

meeting room had one or two walls equipped with floor to ceiling screens, enabling the life-sized participation of people joining remotely. There were even two VR-equipped suites for general use, though the consultants working with the one big tech giant FGTT had managed to snare as a client were generally in there.

The flip side meant desk space was often at a premium mid-week, especially if you arrived after 9am. Many of the nooks and crannies designed as casual spaces had people in them all day. Post-pandemic office predictions may not have worked out perfectly; however, theirs was one of the most thoughtful office spaces Don had seen throughout his career.

Getting out of the lift on the fourth floor, Don and Ryan walked to their respective desks where they had left their laptops earlier. It was no coincidence they were only a few seats apart on the same row.

“Hi! We’re in here,” Joanna called, sticking her head out of a meeting room overlooking the square. “Assuming you’re both awake enough after your coffee. Some of us have work to do, and including you!”

She was smiling her infectious smile, taking all the sting out of the words. It would be hard to guess the origin of the faint East European accent, though Don knew it was her Polish roots. Her intelligence and effectiveness were far more obvious. Almost as tall as Don, her straight blonde hair spilled over one of her baggy trademark designer cardigans, today sky blue, with only a red birthmark on the left of her nose and cheek marring her attractive features.

“Be right there,” Ryan replied across the mostly empty desks as he picked up his laptop and rushed over. Don, following more slowly, was the last member of the team to enter the room.

As well as Don, Joanna and Ryan, Stuart was already sat down, playing with a slide on his laptop. This was the team’s regular Monday morning planning session, looking at the major events happening in the week and how everyone was set up to do what they needed to get done.