

Selected Cases

Kenworth Motors* (Craig C. Lundberg, *Cornell University*)

It began with a telephone call, as did so many of my engagements. The person calling identified himself as Robert Denton, the plant manager of Kenworth Motors' Seattle truck manufacturing operations. Denton said he'd gotten my name from Charles Wright, a client of mine in Seattle. Charlie is the OD manager for a major timber products company. I'd been doing several projects with Charlie's group of internal consultants for the past three years and occasionally served as the OD group's consultant. Denton noted that Charlie and he were members of the same sailing club. He went on to say that when, as someone relatively new to Seattle, he'd asked Charlie if he knew any consultants, Charlie had spoken highly of me. I remember thinking that Charlie probably wouldn't have mentioned me unless he thought I could be useful to Denton. My trust in Charlie's competence and judgment was very high.

Denton went on to explain that he'd been the plant manager for only eight months, that things seemed to be going well, but that he had a gnawing sense that things could be better. I must have murmured something appropriate because Denton invited me to visit him and become acquainted with his operation.

I was both flattered by and interested in Denton's invitation. After all, I thought to myself, it's nice to be wanted, a consulting engagement might come out of it, I always wanted to get behind the gate of the Kenworth plant, and Denton sounded like a basically smart guy and nice besides. However, reality intruded into my thoughts, as it often does.

Thoughts on the Road

I reminded Denton that I lived across the state in Spokane and added that I had limited time available in the short run. I noted that I had plans to visit Seattle in three weeks and could see him then, otherwise it might not be for a month. Denton sounded almost eager as he agreed to a 10 a.m. appointment on April 11.

The drive westward from Spokane across the state of Washington on Interstate 90 begins with several hours of boring highway. I had purposely put off thinking about my appointment with Denton until I was on the road. As the interstate stretched out over the rolling sagebrush hills and checkered wheat fields, I

turned my thoughts to Kenworth Motors and Denton. Uppermost in my mind was that I was about to talk with a man I knew little about, consult with a firm I knew very little about, and I had no focused agenda. What should I say and do?

As the miles went by, I envisioned several alternative scenarios for my upcoming appointment with Denton. I saw his office in several possible ways. It could be spartan and centrally located to the production floor. It could be conventionally furnished but of a fair size. It could be large. It might even be opulent. It could be personalized with mementos of career, hobbies, or family. It might be far from the production floor, or even in a separate building. The more I tried to envision Denton's office, the more alternatives came to mind. So I focused on Denton, trying to imagine him from the voice cues on the telephone—not old, probably fit, probably clean shaven. Again the futility of trying to imagine came home to me.

What did I think I knew? I didn't know much beyond a handful of facts about his title and his job tenure, the fact that he knew Charlie, believed things were generally going OK at the plant, and had some vague notion something wasn't quite right. I also had the distinct impression he had been fairly eager to talk with me—after all, he'd initiated calling me and had quickly settled for an appointment convenient to me.

What did I really want to accomplish when I met with Denton? The more I considered this question, the more I pared down my answers. At minimum, it seemed for me a low-cost situation—a couple of hours of my time, perhaps some impressions of me that would be communicated to Charlie (though I believed Charlie and I had a relationship of mutual respect and trust based on a lot of shared work). On the other hand, there was potentially a lot to gain—perhaps another consulting job, perhaps more visibility and reputation in Seattle, which would be good for my business.

I decided I couldn't plan for our meeting in much detail; about all I could reasonably do was to be true to the posture I found to be useful in situations like this. I had to be myself, be as real as possible. I see myself as a curious, friendly person who basically likes others. I also know I can be bold and thought I might have to be to get the conversation going, to help Denton become clear as to why we were talking together, and to clarify my role.

I also wanted to leave our meeting with a decision to either go forward or not. While I didn't mind investing a little time, my time was valuable. I also felt strongly, as I always do, that I didn't want to work with anyone who I didn't basically like as a person or who didn't seem to genuinely want to do some real

work. Seeing the Cascade mountains on the horizon, I began to feel easier. I'd be myself, whatever happened. Only one question nagged: Could Denton and I connect swiftly enough so there would be time to push for clarity in our possible work relationship?

Making Contact

At the Kenworth plant, the uniformed guard at the plant gate checked his clipboard, slipped around my car, and copied down my license plate number. Returning to my open window, he pointed ahead to a one-story brick building attached to the multi-storied plant and told me I could park in the space in front and then go inside and identify myself to the receptionist.

The floor of the wide hallway inside the double glass doors of the office building was freshly waxed. Framed photographs of trucks and large buildings lined the walls. A middle-aged woman in a suit looked up from her desk and smiled. After I identified myself, she led me down a side corridor to an alcove and informed the secretary there who I was and that I was there to see Mr. Denton. She then turned to me, smiled again, and wished me a good day. The seated secretary told me Mr. Denton was expecting me, but was on the telephone. She gestured toward a bank of chairs and asked me to wait. As I sat down, I observed the corridor traffic, busy but quiet. I settled back to wait.

About 10 minutes later, a man of medium height and build wearing a sports jacket over an open-collared shirt came through the door behind the secretary and walked directly to me. He extended his hand, smiled, introduced himself as Bob Denton and motioned me into his office.

The office was larger than I expected. It was paneled and a large Persian rug was centered on the floor. At one end were a clean desk with side chairs and a table full of papers behind it. At the other side of the office were a couch and two stuffed chairs around a low coffee table. Drapes framed one large window that looked out on the parking lot. Denton asked if I wanted coffee, and I said I did. He went to the door and asked the secretary to bring us both coffee and added we were not to be disturbed. While waiting for the coffee, we sat on the two stuffed chairs and made small talk. He asked about my drive across the state; I asked about the framed sailing prints on the wall and whether he'd been sailing lately. We chatted about the Sonics, the Kingdome, and the coming World's Fair in Vancouver. After our coffee arrived, I asked him to tell me about his plant and products.

Denton spoke excitedly for 10 or 12 minutes on a wide range of topics—the daily production rate of 23 trucks, the cost of a truck, the sales order backlog, some equipment updating just finished, his coming to this job from a plant in the Midwest, his spending a lot of time lately with the next year’s budget, and so forth. My impression of Denton was that he was highly involved in his work. He spoke rapidly but clearly with enthusiasm. Finally, he leaned back, smiled, and said, “Well, I’ve been going on, haven’t I?” I remember thinking I liked Denton’s ease and his willingness to talk about his plant and himself. I’d already learned a lot about the plant and his job without more than looking interested. Denton certainly did seem likable, and he was younger and more casual than I expected.

Getting Down to Business

I clearly recall my response to Denton’s question. “Actually, I’ve appreciated your sharing all this background with me. I’ve always been curious about this plant. Years ago, I had a part-time job when I was in college and used to deliver some industrial supplies in this end of town and always wanted to know what happened in this plant. All I could see from the road were those lines of big shiny trucks. It’s nice to know they’re built with care. But you asked for this meeting, Bob. Remember, you told me that while things were going well here you sensed something wasn’t quite right. Can you tell me a little more now?”

“Not really. I know the plant is doing fine. I feel pretty much on top of my job. I like what I’m doing here very much. My department heads—all nine of them—are all good people. All but two have been here quite a while. They’re dependable, damn good at what they do, get along fine, and basically are good managers,” he said.

“I get along good with everyone. I go out in the plant every day and circulate around. Things are moving smoothly. My two newer managers—one runs our purchasing and inventory, the other is in personnel—couldn’t be working out better. Yet some things nag at me that I can’t put my finger on. I guess it boils down to some crazy notion I have that while we get along fine and work together well, we haven’t jelled together as a team quite like I’d hoped.”

I bombarded Denton with questions, trying to find something that didn’t hang together or might indicate a problem. No matter what I asked about—from union relations to accounts receivable, from engineering-production relations to turnover figures—Denton’s responses were consistently factual and full, and everything seemed to be in remarkably good shape.

I caught myself from going on with more questions. Instead I said, “Bob, everything I’ve been asking about tells me you’re OK. Maybe things here really are OK. Maybe you’ve just got some apprehension that things couldn’t be that good. After all, you’ve been here long enough to really know. While there is some chance that you’re not well informed, and some things aren’t so hot, the odds are against it. About all I can suggest is whether you might want someone like me to independently confirm how things are going.” Denton smiled as if to himself and replied, “Hmm, maybe, what would you suggest?”

“What’s usually done in situations like this, if there is the interest and if there is the money to pay for it, is to engage someone like me to spend a few days interviewing a sample of managers and other key staff people to see what might turn up.”

“From what you’ve heard so far, do you think that makes sense here?” Denton asked.

“Frankly, I don’t know. It might be worth it to you just to learn things really are OK. What usually happens, however, is that I do find out about something that could be improved. After all, that’s what I’m supposed to be good at, finding problems. One way or another, Bob, the mere fact I was here would have some impact. The word would spread pretty fast that some outsider was snooping around. What impact that might have I can’t say. If things really are OK, my presence might mean little. If there are real problems, my being here would probably create some tensions, it could raise expectations that something would be done about them, and it could even cause problems.”

Denton nodded, “I see what you mean. If you came in, it would cost me some bucks, it would have some risks in how my people reacted; one way or another I’d have to do something.” He paused and then went on. “Well, to tell the truth, I don’t want to upset things if they’re OK, but just finding out whether they are or not appeals to me. Isn’t there some other way to do this?”

Denton seemed to me to be open to some minimal work by me. He’d responded as I’d hoped to my candidness about the risks of some conventional diagnostic snooping. He’d really seemed to pay attention to what I’d said, and I was beginning to like him and was intrigued with the situation. At times like this, my thought processes seem to jump into high gear. After all, a careful response was called for and there were a number of considerations to factor in. The things I recall noting to myself went like this: apparently some minimal motivation on Bob’s part; my real lack of information about the Kenworth situation; my own schedule for the coming months—which was pretty full; my intuition that

probably nothing major was wrong with Bob and his managers; and that whatever I proposed had to be of modest cost.

Let's Have a Retreat

I said to Bob: "Let me sketch out one idea that comes to mind. We could do a modest retreat. You, your department managers, and I could meet away from here for a couple of days, say on a weekend, to jointly explore how things are going. At minimum, I see several probable outcomes from such a meeting: everyone would get somewhat better acquainted with one another; we'd know better if there were serious issues to tackle; we'd have the experience of jointly going through problem identification; and you'd get a sense of whether or not your team was open to working with an outsider like myself."

I paused and went on: "Such a meeting would be relatively efficient. It wouldn't take time away from work, and it wouldn't cost an arm and a leg." Bob nodded, sipped his coffee and looked at me intently. "OK," he said, "I can see your points. Just what would we be doing?"

Seeing Bob's interest as well as warming to the idea myself, I went on to outline a retreat. I suggested doing it at a country club or lodge within a few hours' drive of Seattle. This setting was to provide a symbolic break from the customary business environment, and because it would cost everyone weekend time and the company the expense of travel, food, and lodging, it would show Bob's seriousness about the event. I then suggested we begin with cocktails and dinner on a Friday evening, work all day Saturday with appropriate breaks, and conclude by noon Sunday. Again, Bob nodded. He then asked, "But what would we do? What would you charge?"

I did some quick calculations and responded, "As for my fee, I'd have to bill you for a minimum of three days at my daily rate of \$__ per day, and travel expenses—assuming Kenworth would provide food and lodging. As for what we'd actually do, that's more difficult to say exactly. Frankly, while I have several ways to get us started, I'd need to play it by ear. In general, it would be my responsibility to see we talked straight and a lot with one another to surface our concerns both big and small. I'm afraid you'd have to trust me on this." I said these last couple of sentences with some trepidation, knowing from my experience that most managers would want much more clarity, but I needed to know how Bob was viewing me.

I was surprised at what happened next. Denton quickly agreed to have a retreat weekend as I'd outlined. We also selected a weekend a month-and-a-half away.

He would find a site and let me know. In addition, we agreed he would use the phrase “a communications workshop” when he informed participants. Glancing at my watch as I left Denton’s office, I saw it was just 11:30.

Questions

1. How well did the OD consultant prepare for the meeting with Denton? Would you have done anything differently?
2. In the discussion between the OD consultant and Denton, what was effective and ineffective about the consultant’s behavior?
3. How effective was the contracting process described in the last part of the case? What is the scope and clarity of the agreement?
4. How would you design the upcoming retreat?