

The Overachiever

It was Friday morning in December 2010. I was tying loose ends getting ready to leave for the Cayman Islands for vacation when I received the email titled “*I hope you still remember me?*” My first reaction was to place it in the junk mail folder, suspecting another spam email but the sender’s name sounded familiar, making me wonder if it was the student I had so many years ago. I opened the email and was surprised reading:

“Twenty-five years ago you made me read the IBM software manuals before you were willing to teach me saying that you learned computer programming with the aid of a Hebrew-English dictionary, and that if you could do it, I should not have difficulty since English is my native language.

Today I’m chief information office at a nationwide distribution company and always thank you for forcing me to study. I’ll be coming to New York with Dave, my son, who just graduated from high school. I would like to take you out to dinner and hope you’ll be able to meet us and convince him to go to college.”

Robert’s face surfaced in my mind after I finished reading the letter. When I met him he was a good looking twenty-year old kid with long smooth black hair and scars on his face from street fights.

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“Who is running your computer?” I asked my client on my first day at his electronic store, assuming he did it.

He looked at me, hesitated for a second and then said,

“Robert, who is my computer operator, is unreliable. He shows up at work late in the morning and leaves late afternoon. He often takes days off and doesn’t bother to call saying that he won't come to work.”

“Should you get rid of him?” I told my client.

“Easier said than done. He’s my wife’s nephew. If I let him go she’ll give me hell.”

Robert walked into the computer room at 11am, saw me evaluating the IBM software and gave me a quizzical look before starting to work. I ignored him and talked to the users analyzing their requirements when he approached me and said,

“I guess you’re our new computer consultant. I don’t think you’ll last here more than a week.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked him.

“Because it’s a messed up shop and everybody else who was here before you gave up and left after a couple of days.”

“I won't give up.”

“Good luck. I’m sure you’ll end up leaving before the week is over the same way the other consultants have. Look at the place. It’s filthy. Electronic parts are lying all over the floor. Every time I suggested to Jerry, the owner, to buy shelves and fix up the place he tells me it’ll cost too much money and his business is doing fine as it is. Wait until he tries to lower your fee, saying it’s too expensive.”

Robert was right. When Jerry got my first invoice he complained and asked me to give him a discount. I told him that it’s not my style of conducting business and that I

would be happy to recommend somebody else to him. When he heard it he apologized and wrote me a check for the full amount. Robert, who heard the conversation, spoke with me when Jerry wasn't around.

"I'm surprised he agreed to pay the full amount. He plays this game with his vendors. As soon as I find another job I'll walk out of here without giving him notice."

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Robert approached me after working with me for a month and said,

"It looks like you know what you're doing. I would like you to teach me the IBM software so I can become an expert like you."

"Let's go out to lunch and discuss it," I told him.

We ate at a coffee shop across the street. After I ordered my tuna sandwich on lightly toasted white bread, I informed him that I have ground rules that he'd have to follow before I'd be willing to teach him.

"What are your rules?" he asked, giving me a quizzical look.

"I expect you to be in the office when I arrive in the morning and to not go home until I leave."

"I won't do it, you're a slave driver" was his response.

Not wanting to get involved with him I said,

"Fine, find somebody else to teach you."

Two weeks passed before he approached me again and said,

"You're a smart man and I can learn a lot from you. I guess I have to accept your conditions."

“You got it right. I have another ground rule you must follow. Before I give you a lesson I expect you to read a chapter in the IBM manual.”

“Ok. I’ll try if it makes you happy.”

“It’s not a question of making me happy. It’s a pre-requisite.”

The following week Robert showed up in the office every morning before I did and left the office in the evening with me no matter how late it was.

One night when we were leaving he asked me.

“When are you going to start to teach me?”

“After you prove to me that you read a chapter in the IBM software manual.”

“Ok. I’ll do it this weekend. Would you give me a lesson Monday?”

“If you prove to me that you studied.”

On Monday morning we were supposed to have the first lesson. When I realized that he hadn’t studied, I got off my chair and walked away.

“Where are you going? We’re supposed to have a lesson,” he asked, following me.

“Our agreement was that you study a chapter before I teach you.”

“I didn’t understand what I read. It felt as if I were reading something written in Chinese.”

“Guess what? When I came to this country I learned computer programming with the aid of a Hebrew-English dictionary. Since English is your native language you shouldn’t have a problem reading the manual.”

“You must be kidding me.”

“I’m not. It’s my ground rule that you must follow.”

* * *

I was pleased Robert made the effort to study the IBM manual that was difficult to comprehend, and gave him a lesson every Monday morning before we started to work. Jerry, pleased that Robert was showing up to work before me and left when I went home, spoke to me about it.

“Give Robert a raise,” I told him. “He’s underpaid. I hate to see him leave because he got a better job offer. He’ll stay here as long as he feels he can learn from me but it won’t last forever.”

“He should pay me. You educating him cost me money.”

“You’re making a dire mistake and will regret it later.”

“I guess you’re right. How much should I give him?”

“Increase his pay by \$50 a month.”

“You must be kidding; \$30 will be more than enough.”

“Do you want him to leave?”

“Ok, I’ll follow your advice.”

Robert’s productivity increased and he got involved with resolving user issues with the IBM software, enabling me to do other tasks. Pleased with his performance, I felt that eventually he would become an expert at solving complicated software issues

and knew he would leave when he got a lucrative offer. Despite the fact that I hated seeing it happen I was proud of his achievements and kept teaching him.

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One Monday morning when I arrived at the office I was surprised to find that he wasn't at work.

“Where is Robert?” I asked Jerry.

“He called me at home on Friday night saying he needs to take time off but did not explain why and hung up the phone before I had a chance to ask him. When I called him back I got his voice mail.”

Robert was out the entire week, leaving me with the additional tasks of running the computer operation and assisting the users when they had issues.

By the end of the week I was frustrated with working long hours and told myself that I'd stop teaching him. On Monday morning Robert showed up with a suntan and walked over to me smiling as if nothing had happened.

“Don't be angry with me,” he told me seeing that I was upset with him.

“Where have you been?” I asked him.

“I was in Florida.”

“I'm glad you had a good time. You should coordinate it with me rather than just taking time off.”

“You're right. But it's not what you think.”

“Why did you go to Florida?”

“I was interviewed by IBM.”

“IBM has a freeze on hiring.”

“I know. My uncle who is an executive vice president arranged the interview. After being interviewed for fifteen minutes I realized they were going to get rid of me and started to tell them what was wrong with the software and what should be done when it freezes without having to restore the previous night backup. They were stunned and called the level three support supervisor to come and speak with me.”

“How did you make out?”

“Very well, he interviewed me for two hours, not believing that I had so much knowledge and kept asking questions. I was able to answer all of them until he asked me about the year end procedure that I didn’t know.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That there is an SOB computer consultant at the place I work in New York who’s teaching me and forces me to read the IBM software manuals every week before he gives me a lesson. We haven’t gotten to the year end procedure yet that’s why I couldn’t answer his question.”

“He must have loved your response.”

“He thought it was funny and asked why you were doing it.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him that you learned computer programming with the aid of a Hebrew-English dictionary and kept telling me that since English is my native language I should be able to read the IBM software manuals, otherwise you won’t teach me.”

“How did the manager react?”

“He was impressed and told me he respected you before offering me a job.”

“Did you accept it?”

“Yes and no.”

“What do you mean?”

“I told him that I can’t start until I hire and train my replacement no matter how long it’ll take because I owe it to you.”

“What did he say?”

“He told me to take as long as I needed and made me promise him that when I decide to leave IBM I’ll give him the same courtesy.”

* * *

He hasn’t changed I told myself when we met. He looks like the kid I knew twenty-five years ago with one difference; he was mature and had gray hair. His son Dave on the other hand was a husky, muscular boy who looked like a football player. When we spoke over dinner he told me that he had just graduated from high school, didn’t intend to go to college and wanted to pursue a career as a professional football player.

“What are your chances of becoming a football player?” I asked him.

“I don’t know. I suffered a knee injury when my high school team had the last game of the season and still have to go to physical therapy.”

“In that case you might not be able to be a professional football player.”

“That’s the issue I’m facing now. My father wants me to go to college but I don’t want to.”

“Why?”

“I hate school and don’t feel like spending four more years in a classroom.”

“No matter what career you choose you won’t get ahead unless you go to school.”

“That’s what my father keeps telling me. He also told me that you forced him to read the IBM software manuals before you gave a lesson. Now he’s making me do it.”

Not wanting to spoil the dinner I didn’t pursue the subject. Dave, oblivious, kept telling me that all his life he had heard his father talk about me, saying that if I hadn’t insisted he study, he wouldn’t have gotten as far as he did.

* * *

For the next six months Dave kept calling me, discussing his frustration working at Wal-Mart for a minimum wage and his conflicts about school. He finally agreed to enroll at the community college and take computer courses. He found out that he enjoyed the subjects he was taught and wanted to excel in the field. Two years later he graduated on the Dean’s list, got a scholarship to the University of Florida and was able to transfer all his credits.

Dave was in his senior year when he decided to drop out of school and join the Marine Corps to fight in Iraq. Despite Robert’s and his mother Linda’s pleas he wouldn’t change his mind. As a last resort Robert decided to ask for my help, hoping I’d be able to convince him not to join the Marines.

I called Dave, had a long discussion with him and told him:

“Maybe you should finish school first before you join the Marine Corps. You only have one semester left before you graduate.”

“I don’t want to wait. Three of my buddies have joined the Marine Corps already.”

“What do you think you’ll achieve by going to Iraq?”

“Help find the weapons of mass destruction that Saddam Hussein has hidden.”

“There are no such weapons; the UN observers couldn’t find any.”

“You can’t trust the UN. That’s why we had to invade Iraq.”

“It’s a war about oil and Halliburton selling arms to the military.”

“I don’t believe it. You sound like my father. Everybody is trying to convince me not to join the Marine Corps.”

* * *

It was the last conversion we had about joining the Marine Corps. The next day Dave went to the Marine recruiting station and met a sergeant who told him they only accept the best. After he finished his boot camp he came with Robert to New York to visit me. Dave wore his uniform and had a proud look when he told me that he was assigned to go to communication school before being shipped to Iraq. Robert didn’t say a word, had deep lines around his mouth and couldn’t eat his meal at Villa Napoli, which was his favorite restaurant in Manhattan. For the next eight months Dave wrote to me about how happy he was to have made the decision to join the Marines, and how he planned to go back to school using the GI bill after his service ended. In his last letter he wrote to me that the Humvee ahead of his was destroyed by an IED bomb and everybody aboard got killed while trying to protect a supply convoy.

Unable to fall asleep after I finished reading the letter, I hoped he'd return home safe. A week later the phone ringing at 5am woke me up from a distorted dream seeing a Humvee burning in the hot sun at the side of the road. I hoped I was still dreaming when I heard Robert's choked voice and Linda sobbing in the background.

"What happened?" I asked, afraid to hear the answer.

"We were just notified that Dave was killed by a sniper. His body is being shipped home."

"I'm coming over."

I called Delta Airlines after I hung up the phone and booked an afternoon flight to Miami. Robert and Linda met me at the airport and asked me to stay at their home. At first I was going to tell them that I would rather stay in a hotel but changed my mind when I saw the pleading look they gave me. I slept in Dave's room and had nightmares every night seeing American soldiers patrolling streets in Iraq, scenes I had gotten used to from watching the nightly news.

* * *

I stood next to Robert and Linda by the open grave staring at the coffin covered with a flag, refusing to believe that Dave was in it. The twenty-one gun salute reminded me that he was dead. At that moment his words surfaced in my mind, "*He also told me that you forced him to read IBM manuals before you gave a lesson. Now he's making me do it.*"

I felt the warm tears rolling down my face, looked at Robert staring at the open grave and Linda sobbing holding on to his arm.

“It’s a war about oil and Halliburton selling arms to the military. How many more young men and woman will be maimed or killed before we bring the troops home?” I asked myself.

I didn’t realize that I said it in a loud voice until I saw the effect it had on Robert. His face was pale and he grabbed my hand as if asking me to change his reality again.