

The Temperamental Talent

Background

Vincent Randell is the Head of Personnel, at Jordan Tectonics, a small software engineering firm located in the North of England. Ten minutes ago he received a telephone call from **Chris Rosen**, the Head of Research and Development, who asked to see him urgently. Deeply concerned about the anger in Chris's voice, Vincent said to come over to his office immediately.

Chris explains the problem

"Hi Chris, what can I do for you? It seemed really important on the phone" said Vincent, greeting Chris into his office and inviting him to sit down.

"He's done it this time. He's really gone over the top. This will be impossible to sort out without a battle" yelled Chris, getting more and more agitated.

"OK, calm down and tell me about it. Who is *he*?" asked Vincent.

"Sorry, it's Mark, you know our leading software designer, the person Frank was rattling on about at the meeting on Monday. I said I wanted a word about him, but things have just become impossible since then" replied Chris.

"So what's happened?" prompted Vincent.

"Well apparently last night Frank went down to the test room to remind Mark about a meeting today with a new client. Mark was at his terminal and without turning round said to Frank to wait a minute, then ignored Frank for 15 minutes. Frank suggested that he stopped 'playing'. Next they had a blazing row and Mark stormed out. What's worse, he's not in this morning and the meeting with the client has had to be rescheduled."

"Is this the first time he's done something like that?" asked Vincent.

"Yes, well no, it's not the first time Mark has lost his temper. We've had some real battles in our time, but he's never taken it this far before" replied Chris.

"Has he missed client meetings before?" Vincent probed.

"Only once, when his mother was rushed into hospital. Maybe there are personal problems this time, though he has not said anything to me. The trouble is Frank is adamant saying we cannot have staff behaving like that and that Mark's got to go. I agree we can't have people behaving like that, but Mark is the brightest spark we've got. Everyone recognizes he's a genius. He's difficult, but we can't afford to lose him, and the opposition would grab him in an instant. Frank does not understand that."

"How would other people, apart from Frank describe Mark?" asked Vincent.

Chris thought for a moment. "Depends on who you talk to" he said. "Most colleagues would see his good side. I find him hard to manage. He can be pretty temperamental, but I admire him. He is extremely able and dedicated. He may like playing computer games but he's the hardest working person in my department. He says he uses the games to 'break free' when he is working on a really difficult problem. I can understand that but we have to get him to understand the pressures we are under." Vincent paused, then queried "Have you tried talking to him before?"

"Yes, he says he loathes people looking over his shoulder. What he wants is a clear target and then to be left alone" replied Chris.

"Can you afford to lose him?" Vincent asked.

"Certainly not at the moment. I know our competitors are 'courting' him."

"How am I going to approach him, without making it worse?" Chris asked pensively.

"I must find a way of getting him to conform a bit, without losing his commitment."

Vincent smiled. "Well let's think it through, clearly you will need to be well prepared when you talk to him. We cannot afford to go wrong this time."

Immediately after his discussion with Vincent, Chris went back to his office to think about how to approach Mark. He knew he needed to be careful and plan his approach. He certainly did not want another battle.

By nature he was not a particularly forceful person. He preferred to work 'with' people rather than fight them, but he knew he easily lost his temper when things did not go his way.

Chris wondered about the reason for Mark's non-appearance at work that day. He knew Mark lived alone, but spent quite a lot of time with his family. He wondered if this could be the reason for his absence. He decided to call Mark into his office as soon as he came in, find out why he had missed work and sort the situation out once and for all.

Mark explains his absence

Two days after speaking to Vincent, Mark was back at work. Chris called him straight away.

"Hi Mark, glad you are back. Can we have a word this morning some time?"

"Is it urgent?" Mark replied quickly. "I'm just about to start on the revision of the P70 spec."

"Yes it's urgent and it will only take about half an hour. Can you come at 9.30?"

"Hey, sounds serious. Not going to sack me are you?" laughed Mark. "Certainly not" replied Chris shortly. "Look, I need to speak to you about a number of things, the other night in particular. Just get up here at 9.30, OK?"

It wasn't meant to be threatening. However, as he hung up the phone, Chris realized he was getting upset again. He took the opportunity to grab a cup of coffee, and plan the meeting. By the time Mark arrived he was ready to talk business.

"Hello, Mark. Thanks for coming up. Take a seat."

Mark sat down, looking a little uneasy.

"As I said on the phone there are a number of things I'd like to talk with you about. We have about half an hour. Is that OK?"

"Sure. What's going on?"

"Well, first, I know you have been off for the last two days. We need to talk about that. Secondly, I would like to know what happened the evening before you went away. And lastly something important happened whilst you were gone."

Chris was pleased he sounded so calm.

"No problem" Mark replied and he added quickly "but there is something I wanted to talk about to you too."

"Something serious?" Chris enquired tentatively.

"Yes, I've been to see the new factory of Thomson Electronics. That's why I took off. Well I had some holiday owing, and there was nothing crucial on here. So when Tom, a friend who works there, asked if I'd like to see the set up, I jumped at it. Thought you wouldn't mind" Mark added.

Chris replied "Well I'm certainly interested in that, but perhaps we could come back to it later. Nothing crucial on here you said. Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I had just cracked the final bug on the Roberts project and had not started on the P70. Why?"

Chris took a deep breath. "What about the meeting with Rawley Manufacturing?"

Mark looked surprised. "Oh that" he said. "I wasn't involved. Why do you mention it?"

"You were not involved?" Chris asked.

"No. When I last spoke to Stephen Bennett's assistant, he said he would get back to me if I was needed. He didn't, so I assumed they could handle it without me."

Chris made a mental note to check with Stephen, and went on. "OK, would you like to tell me about the evening before you went off?"

"What about it?" retorted Mark.

"Did you see Frank Edwards?"

Mark nodded.

Chris went on. "What happened?"

"Well, he arrived in the middle of the final test. I asked him to wait whilst I checked the results. After only a couple of minutes he interrupted me saying "stop fiddling; I need some information for the management accounts." When I said I had just solved a major puzzle he yelled "you're always playing at something". I yelled back and it kind of got out of hand."

Mark sat for a moment, then continued "I realized how tired I was, so when Tom rang to invite me over to see his new plant I decided to take off."

Chris looked thoughtful. "You were tired and so decided on the spur of the moment to visit a friend?"

"Well in fairness, he asked me to go work for his company."

Chris felt a sudden shock. "Are you considering it?" he asked nervously. His expression showed that he almost did not want to know the answer.

"I'd be daft not to" replied Mark swiftly.

The silence seemed eternal, until Chris took a deep breath and said "Well in that case I think this talk needs longer than we can spare right now. We need to sort out exactly what happened the other day. I'm not happy about staff getting into a row with the Financial Director, and if you are considering moving to another company, there's a lot to discuss. How about meeting here, tomorrow morning same time?" "Fine with me" replied Mark without much conviction, "See you then." As Mark left the office Chris sat back. "I need to plan the next stage very carefully" he thought. The company could not afford to lose Mark, given the amount of work that was coming up. Mark had always shown enormous commitment to the company. He worked long hours, never gave up on a problem and showed real interest in the projects they were working on. His colleagues enjoyed his slightly off-beat sense of humor and certainly appreciated his talent. "I can understand Mark's position about being left alone to get on with the job" Chris thought. On the other hand, Mark's manner with Frank Edwards was out of order. Rows with the Financial Director were less than helpful, and missing meetings with important clients, without a word to anyone, was simply not acceptable. "I must get Mark to see that if he wants to progress in the company (or any company for that matter) he simply cannot treat important people in such a cavalier fashion."

The following morning

Chris stood up as Mark walked into his office.

"Hi Mark, take a seat, thanks for coming. We have more time this morning, so I'd like to talk more about your plans to leave. OK?"

"Fine, go ahead" said Mark settling into his seat.

Chris smiled back. "Tell me more about your visit to the Thomson factory" he said.

Mark leaned forward. "It's a really interesting project, sorting out the new CI system, and it would be all my responsibility. It's a great opportunity to expand my experience."

"Is that what you are looking for, to develop experience in these new CI systems?" Chris asked.

"Yes, I like working with you but the rest of the company don't seem to understand what we do. It's different at Thomsons, and this project has a deadline of nine months. They are under a lot of pressure."

"What about after nine months?" Chris enquired.

Mark looked thoughtful. "I'm not really sure what would happen after this project was completed" he said.

"What about the salary? Would it be more than here?" posed Chris.

"Yes, the money's good."

"So, the work would be really interesting for nine months, with an increase in salary, but it would mean moving or a new car and you are not sure what would happen after the project is done?"

Mark nodded.

"I can understand the challenge being appealing" Chris continued "but would you really be better off? What if we could develop your involvement in the CI project here? I am sure we can sort the issues with Frank."

"Could I get into CI here?" asked Mark.

"Well I can't promise, but we could explore it with Personnel. I know Vincent has ideas how we should broaden our base of experience. And it's something Frank Edwards is really keen on" Chris replied.

Mark sounded enthusiastic. "I'd really like that" he said. "I think I'd prefer to stay, if Frank is not on my back. He's really got it in for me, you know. It feels like being spied on. Suddenly you look round and he's there again. That's the big attraction of Thomsons. I'd really be my own boss."

"You will have to sort that out with him directly" Chris pointed out. "But if you BOTH get a better understanding of each other's priorities, I'm sure it will work."

Mark smiled, so Chris continued. "If you won't pursue going to Thomsons I will talk to Vincent about opportunities to get you on CI work. What do you say?"

"Sounds good, but let me think about it. I'll talk to Tom right away, and let you know my decision after the weekend. Is that OK with you?"

Chris smiled. "Great, thanks and I'll have a word with Frank by next week. I'm sure we can work something out."

"Perhaps we can talk about that some more after the meeting" Mark replied. Thanks for your time. I really appreciate your help."

Chris drew a deep sigh of relief as Mark rose and left the office.

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