



Strategic Tale 15.2

(On the importance of formal and informal coordination)

The Ship's Log

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My father was a merchant seaman. When I was a child and he returned from one of his trips he told me where he had been, whether they had had any problems, any setbacks or if everything had gone as planned. I imagine he only told me a small part of what he had experienced, but I didn't care. Those were moments when I felt I was the focus of his attention. Whatever the case, when he finished telling me, I always asked him the same question.

"How's the ship's log, Dad?"

He smiled and always answered the same thing: "Very well, it sends its regards". And I smiled too. Don't ask me why, but I always loved those words, and although for a long time I had no idea what a ship's log was, it meant something very special to me. Until one day, when I was about ten years old, I asked my father what it was.

"Son, the ship's log is a kind of diary in which seamen, when we are on watch, write down the details of what happened on board that day. It's just like your own diary but a lot more boring because we only write down the things that happen on the ship and, I assure you, it's rarely very exciting.

"And then, if it's so boring, why do you write it?" I insisted.

"Because it helps us to know what each one does when they are in charge of the ship. It's an easy and simple way to find out what happened and agree on what needs to be done next. If we didn't use it, the ship would most likely end up being a disaster," my father replied, looking important and smiling broadly.

I never went to sea. Now I run a chain of clothing stores. And I'm not doing badly. A few weeks ago, however, I went to visit one of the stores we have in a shopping centre and I realised right away that something was really wrong. It was chaotic! The clothes were a mess, there were items with no price on them, a few were even creased and crumpled...

Laura and Beatriz were in charge of the morning and afternoon shifts, respectively, so when one finished her day, the other took over. Although the two were good friends



before joining the store, something started to go wrong when they began working together. I talked to both of them, but I couldn't understand anything. All they did was argue and blame each other for the mess.

Then I remembered the ship's log, my favourite conversation with my father, and I thought it might be a way of solving the problem. I wasn't sure it would work, but it wouldn't hurt to try. The idea was that at the end of each day both Laura and Beatriz would make a note of the day's tasks, their observations, and any suggestions they might have for improving the store's operation. I remembered there was a stationery store in the shopping centre with all kinds of materials. I bought a notebook and two pens, one for each of them.

When I told them we were going to start writing a logbook, they looked surprised. Laura had never heard of one and Beatriz, although she had heard of it once, did not know what it involved. I explained it as best I could, trying to remember what my father had told me all those years ago. Of course, I made it very clear to them that the information in the notebook would not be reviewed by me or anyone else. It was only to share with each other.

Maybe it was because of the look on my face when I remembered my father, maybe it was because they didn't dare challenge me, but the fact is that they agreed to give it a go. They only had to spend five minutes reading what their colleague from the previous shift had written, describing their own experience at the end of the day and putting the notebook in the counter drawer before going home. It was more of a tool to record their impressions each day, and if they identified any issues, big or small, it didn't matter; they could discuss them with each other. We decided to start after Christmas. They showed me what they wrote:

Monday, January 7

Laura: The sales have started today. The store is in total chaos. I can't take it anymore. It has been eight hours non-stop. I've left at 3.00 p.m. and I don't want to know anything about the store until tomorrow. Let Bea manage as best she can.

Beatriz: Today, the sales have started. When I arrived at the store, everything was in a mess. To make matters worse, Laura left without telling me what had happened in the morning, so I had to work it out for myself. At 9.00 p.m. I closed the store and everything was left in a mess, but I can't do any more today. Tomorrow will be another day.

Tuesday, January 8

Laura: When I entered the store this morning, I wanted to die. Bea had left everything all over the place, so I spent almost an hour tidying up. Of course, when I finished my shift today, I gave her a taste of her own medicine and didn't bother to tidy up.

Beatriz: Another awful day. When I arrived I had to reorganise everything because Laura has not bothered to tidy up. This cannot go on. I'll talk to Laura tomorrow and give her a piece of my mind!





When Beatriz came into my office a week later, I knew immediately that the experience had not gone well. Perhaps I hadn't understood my father well, which was a pity because I would never have a chance to ask him. That made me feel sad.

Beatriz was not as angry as I thought. She told me they had spoken to each other and that she was there on behalf of both of them. She told me they had not thought the idea I had proposed had been a bad one and that both had fulfilled their commitment to fill in the logbook - she expressed herself quite calmly and maybe even with a touch of pride - but that the problem was they were not entirely sure what they should do when they handed over at each shift change.

"And what do you suggest?"

"Well, we've realised there's no protocol, or whatever you call it, that clearly indicates what exactly we should do when starting and finishing each shift. What's more, when we go home, we are exhausted, and the last thing we want to do is think about the next shift. Basically, we never speak to each other."

I was surprised to hear Beatriz talk about "protocol", but the truth is she was absolutely right. I jotted down on a piece of paper some rules of procedure for the shift change and called them to a meeting a few days later for their feedback. They had good suggestions, I must admit, and we finally reached two agreements. The first involved the wording of the protocol: "At the end of their shift, each manager must leave the store perfectly organised and tidy. Although the shift ends and starts at three in the afternoon, both managers must coincide for at least 15 minutes to comment on how the morning has gone and on the state in which she has left the store, orders... and any other outstanding issues. The schedules are therefore modified as follows: one week, the morning manager will end her day at 3.15 p.m. and the following week, the afternoon manager will start her day at 2.45 p.m."

The second agreement involved continuing with the logbook they had started. Before finishing their shift, each one of them had to make a note of what had happened during that morning or afternoon, of anything pending, and how they felt. In short, whatever they wanted, it was their diary, it was their logbook. Of course, I had to promise them that I would replace the notebook when the current one was full.

Tuesday, January 22

Laura: When I arrived at the store this morning, I couldn't believe it. I almost cried with emotion. Everything was perfectly placed and tidy. In addition, I have read what Bea has written about how things were yesterday and I have started working knowing what I was doing. I wasn't sure if this protocol could work, but I think the extra 15 minutes we do every day are worth it.

Beatriz: When I arrived today at 2.45 p.m., Laura was arranging and placing the goods in the store. I have even been able to give her a hand. She also explained to me how things have gone. And I must say that she has been very friendly. This is going much better. I enjoyed reading her comments in our logbook.





Wednesday, January 23

Laura: This afternoon I have met Bea to have a few beers after work. It's time to get back to the friendship we had before. I don't really know what happened to us, but I really want to see her again.

Beatriz: I'm going to have a few beers with Laura. After a cooling off period, it is time to rebuild our friendship. We are back to our old selves, just as we were before we started working together in the store. I thought I would never say this, but... thank goodness for the protocol and thank goodness for the logbook!

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