

Leah Early

Marshall Islands

Human Connections

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Not Our Way

"To return your company to a healthier position, you will need to cut, fire, or furlough 12 to 15 employees and . . . "

Larry White needed go no farther. No one in the KITCO boardroom listened. Eyes darted among the bent heads of the board members and back to the Chairman Amata Kabua. Amata's eyes focused on the sheet of paper provided by Larry, a CPA from the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA), and part of a business resource team including my husband Lee and myself.

Elmo, an older board member mumbled, loud enough to be understood in his halting but forceful English: "This . . . is NOT . . . our way!"

Thus, economic and cultural values began wrestling. This sport of sorts never became more visible than in the Marshall Islands of the Pacific during the 1970s.

Most businesses provided goods and services for a reasonable profit. However, people conducting business in the Marshalls carried an extra burden. They bore an obligation to never turn down a relative or neighbor in need. What a dilemma to be in! Committed to making enterprises profitable and at the same time required to always say "yes" given their culture's operating social contract.

Walkup Silk, a respected elder with a wonderful name lived near us. I asked him one afternoon after work to please explain to me what "Not Our Way" meant.

"Our people learn from the beginning of life to share with others. When a member of my clan comes to me needing rice, I give him rice. This is our way.

Our ancestors feared the big ocean waters.
And yet, they feared more the fires of chaotic, erupting volcanoes in Asia.
My people pushed canoes from a firm coast into an unknown ocean.
They shared among themselves rumors about the stars and sailing the great waters.
They shared hard times at rowing;
They shared a big fish they caught on one day,
The little fish they caught on another day and
Growling stomachs and weak muscles on the next days with no fish.
After many months, they shared land they found together.
We exist today because we learned to share and to care for every person.
This is our way."

And yet, back in the economic/cultural wrestling ring, a few merchants hired non-Marshallese managers from Taiwan, Korea, Australia, China and/or the USA to perform the necessary job of managing their stores and saying "No". The firmer the non-island manager in his nay saying, the better the owner and his enterprise's chance at succeeding.

I must admit I admired the values practiced in cooperative societies like the Marshall Islands. But, bumping into them after my living 32 years in the United States, called for a radical reorientation by my husband and me, plus our friend Larry, the CPA. The situation required creativity.

Our first experiences played out while working with KITCO and this specific board meeting. The company sat paralyzed in a dismal spot: cash poor and creditors clamoring for their monies and with few trade goods to sell, save unidentifiable Japanese canned items. We failed to find anyone who remembered how long ago the labels disappeared. One fellow said the rats got so hungry, they chewed them off because they liked the taste of the glue on the cans.

What lurked in the cans remained a mystery too--even after we opened a dozen cans. The stinky ingredients looked like alien parts of creatures from other planets. We

later sold all those can goods to a medical doctor who raised ten big, hungry pigs. They wolfed down it all and wanted more.

Sad-eyed employees had not received pay for six-months; their disgruntled families tired of living in perpetual scarcity. The general manager's creative bartering provided them with basics foods like white rice and 14-ounce cans of tuna. However, Mr. Narroon's pool of bartering items grew smaller and less desirable each month. The best fishermen among the group took turns catching reef fish for all. But even fishing proved hit or miss.

In the board meeting, Amata Kabua turned to Larry and asked: "Isn't it possible to keep costs at a minimum until business improves?" He scanned the table before continuing. "Isn't it possible to link payroll to percentage of profits we make. Paychecks might need to be reduced, but, in a manner where every person gets the same percentage of pinch on his/her check, no matter the agreed upon value of the job?"

"Oh yes," Larry confirmed.

"Sounds like the Marshallese way." declared Elmo as the gentlemen checked with each other and agreed.

I don't remember how long we KITCO folks received the modified pay; I do recall the paychecks I received never came with the same amount of money paid to me. When the company's reorganization evolved into a smooth-running venture, receiving full paychecks (although still small by USA standards) made me giddy with a strange sense of accomplishment.

During my second year living in the Marshalls, I became aware of other things about their sharing community. For example, one afternoon a businessman from several doors down the street dropped into the CPA's office. I happened to be with Larry when the gentleman appeared. Mr. Bien stated he came on personal business. He added as if in a hurry, "My son and daughter-in-law planned to join us in 15 minutes."

He was worried about his bored and useless 20-year-old son and his wife. "They are not interested in anything. You 'Blue-Shirts' do many things. (Blue Shirts was a name given to us because we all wore easy-to-spot navy tees, shirts and/or blouses.) I'm hoping, if they spent time with you, maybe they will learn skills they can use to support themselves and their community. A first child is on its way and caring for family is important, yes?"

To make a long story short, Jason and Lilly joined us at 6:00 in the morning for breakfast and a planning session before we dispersed to our day jobs and rejoined our staff in the evenings at 6:00. Some evenings they stayed for task force meetings. Those two wore sullen faces and released heavy sighs for a while, as we remembered doing as disgusted youth back home. After several weeks with the same basic time design, their attitudes changed.

With our team's structure and support, Jason discovered he possessed good math and customer relations skills. In no time, his engagement proved to be a real asset along with Jack Silk in Larry's small accounting office. Lilly became a reliable leader, who sang on key in the preschool. In addition, she anticipated needs of the lead teachers by finding pieces of chalk, papers, pencils and fresh towels for wiping sticky little fingers seconds before needed.

One evening, Lilly revealed her aunts wanted time with her on Thursday evenings to prepare her for motherhood. She asked if we thought this a good idea. Of course, the female Blue Shirts thought the plan a fabulous one! We burned with curiosity wondering what happened each week Lilly disappeared to be with her relatives.

First, I noted her sparkling eyes the mornings after the second or third Thursday events with the aunties. A month or so later, Lilly returned to a task force meeting still in full swing. Talking stopped as all eyes followed her as she walked to the table, smiled and sat down next to Jason. They shared a lingering

moment of electricity. The rest of us, caught fast by her transformation, did not have the good sense to turn away. She glowed.

Kathleen, director at the preschool, cleared her throat and asked: "Lilly, What . . . What happened tonight?"

"Oh, the aunties gave me a massage. They used scented coconut oil. I've never been so relaxed and slippery," she said while caressing her soft golden arm.

"Jason and Lilly, I hope what I am about to say is appropriate. I mean it as a statement of wonder, a compliment. Okay?" said Michael.

The two lovebirds smiled and gave him permission to speak.

"Lilly, are you aware tonight you glisten--maybe even shine in the dark?" asked Michael, a single American, who taught sixth graders at the elementary school.

"Oh no," she stammered embarrassed and self-conscious. "But, thank you."

"Must a woman be pregnant to have such a massage?" asked Kathleen. She pointed her finger in Jason and Lilly's direction and announced: "I want some of that!"

Lilly's Thursday evenings became a popular discussion topic, especially with the staff women. What wonderful care! Some nights her skin glowed. Other evenings she came back with freshly washed and braided hair. The next time the treat highlighted special foot and hand scrubs and rubs. The evenings with her aunties continued for several months after the birth of Little Jason.

The teachers among us talked about the necessary elements for a new mother training curriculum. Witnessing Lilly's weekly transformations turned us green with envy and fed our resolved to begin new mother events once we returned to the United States or before should a happy opportunity present itself.

Another exceptional example of leaving no one out or caring for all involved their love and sharing of children. Clans and large extended family groupings took great pride in their offspring as well as their child-bearing women. We learned of a frequent practice of leaving no woman childless.

After trying for a few years and still remaining childless, a Marshallese woman may look to her family to give her a child. Sometimes a sister or cousin volunteers to become pregnant on behalf of the relative and her husband. She bears the couple a child, and they train as natural parents do for the expectant baby. Marshallese consider such arrangements as appropriate, natural, and desirable in their generous and sharing culture.

I too experienced their concern and care for my well-being numerous times. One particular occasion stands out in my memory. I recall Lee's being away in Asia. His original travel plan included a month of marketing a program about leadership and effective group methods in Guam, Japan, Taiwan, Korea and the Philippines. However, the month became three months, and the three months morphed into six months.

Nevertheless, I kept busy until keeping busy required far too much energy. My positive self-talk failed to be convincing. I missed my husband and my children. Surrounded by people and with mountains of work to do, I felt alone, terribly alone, abandoned . . . downright miserable! The smallest things triggered tears spilling through eyelashes and racing down my cheeks.

In the mail I received a letter from Dad, halfway around the world in Galax, Virginia. Without any context, he offered "to send me a ticket home, if I "had had enough of my Pacific adventure".

"What? I screamed to myself. "How in the world did he know? How was he so sure I hated every breath I took in this place?" I grabbed Dad's letter and smashed the paper into a tight wad, while I stomped toward the ocean side beach.

The mid-afternoon sky hung low and angry dark-grey clouds churned and released rain into howling, wind gusts. A storm suited me fine! Was I wet from rain, tears or waves? With no way to tell, I yelled, matching the roar of the storm: "Well, give me all you have? Make it all you've got? I hurled back at Dad and God: "This is my life and I 'm . . . I'm going to live it!"

A week later Marla, a young woman with soft, brown eyes who cashiered in the KITCO store, stopped me long enough to ask if we might talk later. "I'll be getting off at 5:30. Does 5:30 work for you?" she asked.

"Sure, I'll meet you at the handicraft display in the store."

Marla and I worked well together. We created a nook in KITCO's store featuring all-natural handicrafts. Most crafters used Ritz dye to color fibers for their basket making. Those items faded to no-color in sunlight. However, Marla and I preferred subtle and natural coloring: dried pandanis leaves and cowrie shells. Tourists liked the quality crafting and unique styling made by ladies from Laura Islet. KITCO featured their work in the window on main street every day of the week for visiting tourists.

At 5:30 Marla arrived talking: "Now Leah, I don't want to embarrass you, but several of your friends and I believe you're missing your husband. This is not good! We do not like that you're lonely and sad. So, we have a plan. We have arranged for a nice man . . . Well, we all think he is handsome and a gentleman. He has said he thinks your husband has been away a long time too, and you need some comfort and company. He is willing to do this for you, Leah." she said stopping long enough to catch a breath of air and look at me.

"What?" My mind exploded: Oh, my word! THEY CAN TELL! Who are they that read me like a book! How awful!"

"Leah, Leah, it's okay. We believe you need a man. You are not embarrassed, are you? Are you mad? Please don't be."

"Well, Marla, I am a bit surprised with this offer . . . uh chance, no . . . opportunity. But I must say . . . I don't need . . . I don't want added problems. That's not part of the promise between Lee and me. It's not our way. Thank you, but no-thank you."

"Would it help if you knew the gentleman's name? I think his name might change your mind. He is the Sen--"

"NO, DON'T TELL ME!" I threw my hands over my ears. "I don't want to know. Please, Marla, thank you for thinking of me. I appreciate the sweet concern."

"Leah . . ."

"I'll be fine!"

"Leah, are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure. Tell All--whoever All are--I am so happy you thought to cheer me up. And you have! I am honored--but STOP ALREADY! Hey, I need to run. Have a good weekend; I'll see you Monday!"

I ducked and ran. To others gathered for evening activities, I reported in as not feeling well and hit the hay early, assuming sleep and two aspirins helped with a humiliation hangover.

Early the next morning before the sun settled into day, I relished a few moments for me. My night's sleep gave me new energies. I entered Act I in my Attitude Adjustment Project and penned a thanks-but-no-thanks letter to my dear father. And, I wondered if Dad fit the category of telepathic or if he showed up as just a good guesser? Either way, I admired his skill and cherished his love.

With still two hours before I needed to join others for clean-up day activities, I delivered on a promised to give myself a pedicure with Hot Coral toenail polish. Ten toes wiggled, flashed and signaled completing Act II.

My fingers reached through and around a cardboard box holding all kinds things I needed from time to time. . . Oh there, yes! I yanked hard and out from under everything, flopped a brand-new notebook. In a second or two and the notebook owned a title: "Leah's Gratitude Journal".

In a first paragraph, I promised in the future I would take time to care for me and I listed a few things I could do here--isolated, alone and surrounded by the Pacific Ocean. Next came an overdue acknowledgment, not original with me, but forgotten. "In every circumstance, attitude is the one thing we have control over." I remember the words coming from my mother's lips on many occasions while my brother, sisters and I rattled around growing up.

In a second entry, I wrote down also an uncomfortable realization, but one which has continued to serve me throughout my life: "I am responsible for my own happiness." I sat quite a while in the early morning stillness.

By mid-morning, I felt ready to join others. I bounded off to meet my clean-up team. Among the early arrivals waited Rick and Thomas, two young down syndrome men, grinning and eager to get started. They never missed a Saturday and a chance to engage with other Majuro neighbors in Saturday Cleanups. They performed four jobs I especially appreciated. They greeted each volunteer with a handshake, introduced themselves every week, called other individuals by name and guarded our one rake as if all our lives depended on it. Due to their vigilance, our team never lost its rake that season!

Over the months in the dry season of the year, we picked up multiple loads of trash, painted signs, trimmed shrubs, chased home rutting pigs, filled road potholes, planted tropical flowers and laughed often. Strong bonds developed within the team as we all took part in hard work and felt proud of the jobs, we performed well--and together.

In my head, I heard again Walkup Silk's words: "*This is our way.*"