

# James Butler's Newsletter #86

Amuse, Inform and Inspire

October 2009

Last month's discussion of what was enough struck a cord with many of you. Claire Thirlwall politely reminded me that she has, on more than one occasion, suggested just such a theme based on the Swedish word "lagom". Wikipedia has a great explanation of the term.

I was also reminded of another phrase in an email from Daphne, when describing progress on her newsletter. "Best is the enemy of good" sums it up perfectly.

Onto this month, and welcome to the many new readers and thanks to all of you who forward it on or recommend it to others. My theme for this month returns to Harry Potter (an inspiration for two issues years ago regarding Dobby) - this month we consider the Death Eaters.

## *Are you a Death Eater?*

For anyone who is not a Harry potter aficionado, Death Eaters are the henchmen for Harry's arch enemy Lord Voldemort. They have a reputation for evil torture, a callous disregard for Harry's welfare and generally being thoroughly nasty chaps. What has always stuck in my mind is the description of their effect on people when they appear - the good humour, hope and happiness seeps from the room, replaced with hopelessness, despair and despondency. So the phrase has become my password for those who we work with or encounter who have the same effect. Know any?

In organisations, large or small, Death Eaters can be recognised by their response to any new idea or initiative - "That'll never work", "Tsk, another crackpot idea", "Well, our customers will never like that" - I am sure you can recall other examples. In some senses, they can be ignored and left to wallow in their misery, but the risk is they pollute others, just like the fictional Death Eaters.

Their impact on teams can be severe, undermining morale, stifling ideas and decreasing productivity. They will continually raise problems, with no offer of solutions.

Can you feel your energy dropping as you dwell on the character of these people? Can you spot people like this in your team? Dare I ask if you are occasionally one of them?

## *Shiny Happy People*

Far better to have a team of people humming REM's famous hit - whilst creating solutions, not finding problems, bringing energy to a room and those in it, and generally portraying a positive attitude to the travails of life and business. How can you manage the Death Eaters and encourage the Shiny Happy People?

**Lead by example:-** as Ghandi told us, we should be the change we want to see in the world. If you want your team to be positive and innovative, you need to portray that attitude yourself. Your colleagues will feed off your attitude, whether you are the leader of the group or not.

**Mind your language:-** if you hear yourself, or others, using negative or problem-centric language, you can highlight the fact and seek alternative forms of expression. I don't subscribe to the idea of banning the word "problem" and describing everything as an opportunity (striking an iceberg was not an opportunity for the Titanic, but it was a problem). But realising how often we use the words can't, won't or impossible can be illuminating.

**Over-compensate:-** if you have a Death Eater creating a problem (opportunity?) in your team, one way to deal with this is for others to over-compensate. Stimulate the flow of positive thought and energy in the team, to outweigh the draining effect of others. This can work, but can be tiring and is not, in my view a long-term solution. It can work if the person's negative attitude is temporary, perhaps driven by personal circumstances.

**Challenge the behaviour:-** many Death Eaters just don't realise they are doing it, and a few well-chosen, timely words to the individual, and a request for a change in behaviour can be enough to turn people around.

**Isolate the source:-** it may be possible to manage situations so that the Death Eater's exposure to other members of the team is reduced – by changing their physical location, altering the membership of project teams or encouraging other staff not to let themselves be drained. This can be unsettling for the Death Eater, so perhaps should only be considered if challenging the behaviour hasn't worked.

**The Killing Curse:-** Harry Potter and his friends had a final resort to eliminate the Death Eaters. I'm not sure of the finer points of employment law, but I am fairly sure this isn't allowed in the UK. But you can remove people from the situation permanently if isolation doesn't work. If it is a member of staff, they can be managed out of the business. If it is a customer, there are ways of letting them go too!

So, your first task this month is to reflect whether you could be described as a Death Eater. Do you add or detract from the energy of a debate or discussion? Are you open to new ideas, or rooted in ways in which they will fail?

And your second task is to manage your workplace to eliminate Death Eaters from your team, whether colleagues or customers. How can you do that?

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### *Painless Business News*

Thank you to those who attended the Late Breakfast in Abingdon this month to hear my thoughts on Business Lessons from ER. I think we all had a good time, and it was a great opportunity to revel in two of my passions – the TV series, and making businesses better run. If you were there, have you implemented all your actions yet?!

My next speaking engagement returns to another passion – Bennie and Bjorn's business philosophy – or what we can all learn from listening to Abba. This is back by popular demand, and will be gracing those attending Ladies That Lunch in Oxford on 24 November. I shall have to unpack my sequinned jumpsuit.

I am delighted to say that the Painless Empire continues to defy the Death Eaters at the BBC and elsewhere who peddle economic gloom like their life depended on it (I guess it does), and we are still busier than ever. This month my associates undertook about half of the phone coaching sessions in the business, which I took as a great sign. They are still looking for more businesses to help, so if you or someone you know wants their business to be better than it currently is, please let me know.

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### *Book Review*

A discussion of this positive attitude topic leads one to a book and film that has now been recommended to me by a few clients – *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne. This deals with the so-called Law of Attraction and has attracted huge fans and lots of detractors. I intend to read this at some point, but have yet to do so. I'd be interested in your thoughts if you have already seen the film/read the book.

Rather than books, this month I want to mention two films that have really inspired and affected me this month. The first is *Skin*, the story of Sandra Laing, a woman born to white parents in 1950s South Africa but who, because of a rare genetic phenomenon, was coloured. An amazing story of discrimination and the in-built prejudice of apartheid. There was a documentary on the BBC just recently on her too, called *Skin Deep*.

The second film similarly asks us questions about prejudice and government systems of oppression. *The Boy in The Striped Pyjamas* tells the story of two boys who become friends across the largest of all divides – the son of an SS commandant and a Jewish camp prisoner. Brilliantly written and directed, the film is one of those that helps you realise how lucky many of us are to live in the place and times we do.

In case you are worried about all these high-brow films, my latest Love Film rental is *The Boat That Rocked!*

### *Painless Puns*

There are so many possible quotes relating to the issue of Death Eaters, so here are a few:

*The fault finder will find faults even in paradise.* Henry David Thoreau

*Happiness doesn't depend on what we have, but it does depend on how we feel toward what we have. We can be happy with little and miserable with much.*  
William Dempster Hoard

*It is almost more important how a person takes his fate than what it is.*  
Karl Wilhelm Von Humboldt

Albus Dumbledore, Harry's mentor often has wise words on a topic:

*Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light.*

*Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?*

Rather than puns this month, I wanted to share these thoughts from Spike Milligan:

*A sure cure for seasickness is to sit under a tree.*

*All I ask is a chance to prove that money can't make me happy.*

### *Final Words*

I have experienced my own share of blessings and tribulations in life, and I still firmly believe that our attitude determines how these affect us, as the quotes above suggest. You can choose to be a Death Eater or one of the Shiny Happy People. Which will it be?

Warmest regards

James Butler

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