

WELL MET

A short story by Matthew Harrison
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“What is this Partition Plan?”

At the Chairman’s interruption, Admin stuttered. His heart beat rapidly, and for a moment he could not manage another word. The Chairman was conducting the meeting in English, even though all but one of those present was Chinese, which made matters worse. Admin’s neighbour HR took advantage of the silence to blow her nose loudly. Around the table the other senior executives, some tall, others short, shuffled in their seats like an uneven row of vegetables swaying in the breeze. The Monday meeting had been going on for two hours now, and little Legal at the far end had dozed off. Admin took a breath, and tried again.

But the Chairman broke in a second time. “I do not want to hear what you are going to do,” he said, glaring at Admin through his rimless glasses. “I want you to explain what you have done.” His English was irritatingly perfect. “Why are the partitions green in this office and blue in Chai Wan? Why can we not get even simple things right in this company?”

Marketing, who was tall and thin and sat at the far end next to Legal, felt that at this point it was safe to nod.

Unfortunately for him, the Chairman was led from one thought to another. “And the partitions are too high,” he continued. “I was walking round the office the other day, and I could hardly see the staff. Only the tallest ones were visible – like you!” He glared down the table at Marketing. Everyone tittered, for of course Marketing was a senior executive and had a large office, not a cubicle. Marketing, uncertain whether it was permitted to be tall, gave a neighing laugh. HR blew her nose again, and put the soiled tissue on the table. Admin managed a sort of whinny. Perhaps the spotlight would pass on.

It did not. “Another thing I notice,” the Chairman continued, “is that there are no names on the partitions. You can walk round this entire company, and neither see a soul nor know a person’s name. It is as if no one works here.” He laughed. A giggle ran round the table, although not very loud because no one was sure what would come next. “Yet I can tell you...” The Chairman paused, eyes glinting behind his spectacles. “... I can tell you, the payroll shows that we have a great many well-paid staff in this company, very well paid indeed.” He drummed his fingers on the table, his nails clacking ominously. Legal woke up.

HR gave a little sniff. The payroll was hers; only *she* could properly appreciate the joke. She crumpled her latest tissue into a ball, adding it to the growing pile in front of her. Marketing, who had wheedled out of Finance the information that he was paid more than Sales – who actually did the work – shrank in his seat so as to be less conspicuous. Admin, who had been singled out by HR last year for a pay reduction, laughed more confidently this time. Brushing aside some of HR’s tissues, he tried again. “You see, when the company merged ...”

“And when was that?” the Chairman asked. The sun had come out and, diffused by the smog that hung over Hong Kong’s harbour, it gently illuminated his ears, which stuck out sharply from either side of his bald head. “Just tell me, when?”

“Three years ago,” Legal piped up. Although mild-mannered in most things, Legal was locked in a bitter feud with Secretarial, so if one of them attended a meeting, the other would be detained elsewhere. And Secretarial was Admin’s only friend in the company.

“So you have done nothing in three years?” Without waiting for an answer, the Chairman went on: “Too many projects in this company get nowhere. I do not want to micromanage...,” (the executives tittered – how far from their thought *that* was!) “...but if I do not get involved, nothing happens. Look at the PCs...”

IT, who had been looking down his prominent nose without saying anything the entire meeting, now looked up. He was the sole *gweilo* – on his account the meeting was being conducted in English – and so he could not be punished, but he could be criticised. The Chairman recounted the story, which he did most weeks, of how the company had nearly bought PCs with CD readers by mistake. Only on his personal intervention had the machines been stripped of this pernicious device. “I am sorry to say it,” said the Chairman – who was in fact enjoying himself – “I am sorry, but if I had not stepped in, our staff would be watching movies at their desks. In fact,” he went on, “I am not sure that some of them are not doing that right now.”

HR had run out of tissues and was beginning to sniff. She mumbled something about the code of conduct.

“Code!” The Chairman was scathing. “Do you enforce the code? Do you have staff watching over staff, on every floor – tall staff so that they can see over the partitions?” He glanced again at Admin, who had been hoping that he was forgotten. “Tell me. Just tell me if you have.” The Chairman drummed his fingers again. He was proud of this gesture. It had impressed his father many years ago, and some said that it was the main reason he had been put in charge of the company.

With the spotlight now on HR, Admin felt it was safe to adjust his chair. He surreptitiously depressed the lever, and with a whoosh the seat jerked upwards. Admin felt his feet dangling, but at least he looked taller from the front. Nervously he awaited the outcome of the discussion.

The Chairman reiterated his dissatisfaction with the generality of management. Each of them was to go back to their office and think about his message. “I will give you time,” he said, “and you can submit your thoughts to me. Of course I have my own views on you all, but I have an open mind. I will be completely fair.”

That afternoon, Admin took a taxi to the Chai Wan office. This was where his staff were based, although since they actually had to serve front line staff – and him – in Central, they spent much of their time traveling to and fro. The taxi swept out from Central’s gleaming towers and along the waterfront expressway, but as it dropped down amid the shabby concrete blocks of Chai Wan, Admin found that he had forgotten where the office was. Nonetheless, when at last he arrived, his staff were pleased to see him. Admin, being a kindly man, was shocked by the conditions there.

"*Gau chor!*" he exclaimed, "What are all these piles of newspaper on the floor?"

"They're for recycling," his staff explained. Then Admin remembered – it was a new idea of the Board. How tiresome everything was!

He examined the partitions. Here, where the afternoon sun shone through the window, they were unmistakably blue. The Chairman was right. But as Admin walked up the aisle, straining on tip-toe to see over the top (the Chairman was right about that too), he passed into a shadier part of the office, and there the partitions seemed greeny-blue, or even aquamarine. Admin stopped. What colour were they in Central after all? Was it bright green, or dark green ... or was it actually bluey-green, like these? He tried to picture the Central office, but partitions of green, blue, and even fiery red swam before his eyes. He rested against a convenient pile of newspapers.

His mobile rang. It was his secretary: a supplier was waiting back at Head Office. Admin knew who it was. "No need for him to wait," he told his secretary.

"He wants to wait," was the reply. "You'd better come."

Admin reluctantly agreed, and clicked his phone off. He could not recall what he was doing in Chai Wan anyway: it was a depressing place – all newspapers and partitions. He had better get back to his office.

In the taxi, with no partitions around, Admin began to feel better. In fact, he began to wonder why he had been so keen to rush back. The thought of the supplier waiting for him loomed more and more ominously as he sped along the highway. It was the very chap who had sold him the Chai Wan partitions. Admin squirmed in his seat at the recollection. He had of course paid, but there were special arrangements, and the fellow had expectations. Admin thought of Finance, but there was no hope that that rat of a man would be accommodating this time. It looked as though he would have to swallow it.

The meeting with the supplier went no better than expected. It took almost an hour to get him out of the office, and in the end Admin had to promise payment the very next day. As it was, the man walked out into the foyer complaining in a very loud voice that *some people* spoke big but acted small. Pretending to laugh, Admin bundled him into the lift, and waved goodbye.

As he turned back to his office, the door of the other lift opened. *Ai-yah!* It was the Chairman! Admin ducked, but not before he had been seen. The Chairman was followed by a number of gentlemen his own age, and then by a younger man. There was something familiar about his face. The young man lingered in the passageway, looking at sharply at the partitions. Then he followed the rest of the party, and Admin had a glimpse of prominent ears before the young man disappeared into the boardroom.

Back in his own office again, Admin sat down. He was trembling. Had the Chairman overheard the supplier? Outside, the sky had become overcast, and cloud was settling on the city; the towers outside his window were scarcely visible. Admin tried to concentrate. What did he have to do? Yes, it was the partitions. He would

make sure of the colour. He rushed out of his room, eyes half shut, then stopped and opened them. Now what colour were they?

A row of partitions stretched forbiddingly down the length of the office. They were unmistakably green. Admin was reassured. Then he remembered that there was no sun. Would they look different in brighter light?

Returning to his office, Admin sat down again, and tried to think. And then he recalled the Chairman's words. Perhaps he should write a memo.

It took him and his secretary many rounds to complete the memo, for the Chairman expected the very best English, but this was what Admin wrote.

"Dear –

Further to this morning Discussion in the Meeting, I would like to submit my Suggestions for Your Kind Attention on the captioned Matter.

We have examined the Partitions in the Head Office and the Chai Wan Office, and they are green and blue respectfully, as you said. Fortunately, we already have had a Plan for the conversation of all Partitios in Both Offices from their colours existing to grey, believing such colour in question to be longer-lasting, and more Durability.

We shall be pleased to explain to you further the Partition Plan at your earliest conveniency.

Hoping for Your Kind attention respectively to this Matter,"

Admin read the memo several times: it was rather good. But he was a perfectionist. He called in his secretary.

"Do you think it should be '...already *had* had a Plan...?'" Admin asked. He prided himself on consulting his staff. "To make it stronger?"

The secretary hesitated. "I don't know; it looks quite strong already."

That settled it. With the correction to '*had* had', Admin signed the memo. And as he walked out down the aisle of partitions that night, he had the satisfaction of seeing the envelope sitting in the departmental outtray. That was another of his systems that was working well. Bother IT and his email – there was nothing like a proper memo!

For the rest of the week, Admin was busy with the toilets. They had been leaking again, and even when they were repaired, the staff still complained of strange smells. In exasperation, Admin had the entire floor fumigated, and this at least stifled complaints. It was only on Friday, as he was leaving the office and was again confronted by the wall of partitions, that he recalled the memo. Perhaps the Chairman would say something in the next meeting.

But the following Monday, the meeting was quiet. The Chairman seemed preoccupied, the eyes barely glanced up from the papers in front of him. Even the

ears seemed limp. He questioned the managers on minor matters – principally HR whose cold seemed worse than ever – and did not even look at Admin. And as Admin made his way back to his office late that morning, he wondered if something had gone wrong.

He got out his memo again. Was it apologetic enough? If not a ‘sorry’, should he have included a ‘regret’, or at least an ‘unfortunately’? He should have confessed to something; that way he might have avoided blame for something worse. Was there anyone he could talk to? Then he recalled Finance: the rat-man seemed to be the Chairman’s favourite.

As Admin entered Finance’s office, the occupant looked away evasively, moving his jaws as if chewing something. He parried Admin’s attempt at a greeting, and when pressed would only say, “Someone’s not on the team.” Then he recalled a meeting he had to go to, and said goodbye, his jaws still working furiously.

Admin knew he was in trouble. Could he get the supplier to replace the partitions overnight? Or spray them a different colour? Then he thought again. Was it really the partitions? Sometimes the Chairman raised one issue while he really had something else in mind. Yes, that was it. Almost laughing with relief, Admin, who was at that moment standing outside his office, gave the partition next to him a slap for its impudence.

At lunch with Secretarial the following day, Admin tentatively raised the subject. Secretarial was pessimistic. He had just dyed his hair brown, which made him look even sadder. “Someone’s for it,” he said.

“What’s on the Chairman’s mind?” Admin asked.

“Who knows,” Secretarial replied. “I asked Marketing. He thought it was the Board meeting. But I can’t see any problem there.”

Admin thought privately that Marketing’s opinion was not worth much. But he said nothing. Secretarial continued, “And Finance thinks it’s Sales.”

Sales. *That* was it. The company’s business had not been expanding recently, despite the upturn in the economy. Yes, indeed. Admin was so relieved at this insight that he almost offered to pay for the lunch. But when the bill came, he did not want to embarrass his friend so he offered to share. He did contribute the tip, although since the service wasn’t good this was necessarily rather small.

When the Monday meeting came round again, Admin was almost looking forward to it. But as he entered, he found the other members talking nervously. Then he saw who they were talking to: it was the young man he had seen with the directors. No doubt he would raise the matter of the partitions. And when the Chairman appeared, eyes glinting, Admin knew that the worst was coming.

The meeting began. Admin kept his head down. Even when the others snickered at the Chairman’s jokes, he did not look up. When it came to his turn to report, he was so nervous he stuttered over the ‘P-P-Partition P-Plan’. But the Chairman merely asked him about the toilets. He hoped that it would not take too long for Admin to fix them, otherwise it would be very uncomfortable – at which

everyone laughed, and even Admin giggled involuntarily. The regular reports finished without further incident.

Little Legal had actually stood up to leave, when the Chairman cleared his throat. "I would like to inform you of my thinking." Legal sat down again hurriedly. "A few changes need to be made in our organisation. I have thought about it, and believe that the time is now ripe."

Everyone held their breath. Admin began to shake again. The Chairman continued. Sales needed more support; he would have extra staff transferred from Marketing, who did not need them. And – he had almost forgotten – would everyone give a warm welcome to the new Head of Finance! The young man smiled and bowed his thanks. The present incumbent, the Chairman said, was resigning for personal reasons. Admin glanced at the present incumbent, and saw that his jaws were working soundlessly. "I am sure you will all join me in thanking Finance for his contribution over the past years," the Chairman concluded.

Everyone clapped, none louder than Admin – who was beginning to hope that somehow this was going to pass without involving him. But he was wrong.

"Last, but not least, Administration." The Chairman paused, and Admin felt all eyes upon him. "I have been looking at the partitions in our office..." Admin tried to recall his arguments, but in his terrified state they all blurred together like a kaleidoscope.

"...Some are green, some blue, some are colours I cannot even name," the Chairman went on. (There was more laughter.) "And they are all so high."

"And..." The Chairman raised his voice. Admin cringed. It was not the end of the world, he told himself desperately. He had savings: he and his wife could manage; he was sure they almost could. Just let it be not too painful. Just not the police. He would confess it all about the supplier: it wasn't a large sum, and anyway, it was partly Finance's fault – mostly his fault, in fact.

"And my son likes it."

Admin gaped at the young newcomer. Dazed though he was, he saw that the eyes, the ears were unmistakable. The Chairman resumed. "He is keen on diversity, personal privacy, the environment – all these new concepts. I leave it to him – and to Administration. We all have to change." Admin felt eyes swivel towards him. "I need to step back now, so I would like Administration to oversee HR as well. If he does not mind."

Admin's heart had almost stopped, but he managed to nod. As the Chairman wound up the meeting, Admin heard the thump of a sodden tissue hitting the table top beside him. Yes, some things needed to change, and he knew just where to start...