



Breaking the Shell

The other day, I had occasion to spend some time with a young man from overseas. I won't say too much about him - his name and other information has nothing to do with our story today - but can simply mention that during my dealings with him, I was reminded more than once of my own younger years; this man's shyness and (overly) introverted character quite closely tracked what I remember of myself during my late teens.

There is one large difference between us though; this man is now in his mid-thirties, and still behaves that way, making it sometimes a bit frustrating dealing with him - what is he trying to say? what is he thinking? - but in my case, I managed to shake off much of the shyness as I moved through my twenties. Or more correctly I should say, I had it knocked off!

Most of that knocking came at the hands of the owner of the music shop where I was employed through many of those years. He himself was a very forthright and fairly aggressive guy, and he didn't have a whole lot of patience with employees who dithered around. If you couldn't clearly state your views, or you couldn't grab hold of something and get it done, you wouldn't be working for him for very long, at least not in a position of any importance.

So bit by bit, under his 'encouragement' as it were, I began to open up a bit and grow into a relatively average person - at least on the shy/aggressive balance, anyway.

But it wasn't always an easy process. Now and then, I would be tossed into an arena where I would have to do things that were utterly foreign to my character, and one such event was the time when I had to defend our company against accusations of selling products into a grey market.

We were the Canadian agency for 'Brand M' flutes from Japan, a very high quality instrument that was much in demand in the market. Another company in the US held the agency for that country, distributing the instruments to local dealers in each state. All very normal, and all very stable. But the owner of our company felt that the US agency was keeping prices too high, so he began to send out instruments - at heavy discounts - to non-authorized dealers in the US, clearly outside our 'territory'.

Those dealers were happy to have a route to obtain the instruments, and for some time, while things stayed 'under the radar', everybody was happy, including the Japanese manufacturer, who were very pleased with our steadily increasing sales.

But all modern musical instruments have a serial number engraved on them, so it didn't take too long before the US agency figured out what was going on. They were receiving instruments for servicing which they had no record of selling. They sent this information back to the Japanese factory, which put two and two together, and we were summoned to a meeting of all parties, to take place at a major international Flute Convention which was being held just then.

As I was attending the convention anyway, I was the person tasked with going to the meeting and presenting our case. The owner gave me a sendoff, "Don't lose our agency, whatever you do! And I want you to come back with permission to sell into all the nearby border states in the US!"

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So meek mild-mannered little Dave headed off to the meeting with about the same level of enthusiasm as if facing a firing squad. Our company had absolutely no leg to stand on, as we were clearly in violation of our agency agreement; my personal beliefs would have led me to bow down and apologize, then throw myself on the factory's mercy, promising never to do it again.

But I didn't do that. The US guys would have eaten me alive, and we could have lost everything. I walked into the meeting with as much confidence as I could muster, threw my jacket over the back of a chair, and then suggested, "OK, let's get things moving; we have a whole bunch of issues to work through, and not much time!"

I would pay practically *anything* to be able to see a video of that meeting now. Intensely shy I may have been, but I can think on my feet fairly well, and I tried to keep the ball in play by supporting our position with whatever arguments I could come up with: the importance of keeping the brand's market share up compared to other flutes, of maintaining 'healthy' competition in the market, of giving the consumers as much choice as possible, etc. etc.

Now none of these points carried much weight at all, and the final edict put down by the manufacturer - we were to stop grey market sales immediately - was a foregone conclusion, and I did ultimately agree in front of everybody that we would cease those activities. And when I heard the Japanese factory representative then say, "From now on, please direct your efforts into improving the prosperity of our brand in your own country!" I knew that I was 'safe', and would be returning home with the best result that could have been expected.

Being put in this sort of situation every now and then will knock the shyness out of anybody I think. Working for such an aggressive boss - for a while at least - should be a mandatory part of everybody's education!

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