

A Visit From Afar



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This is a story that many people working in the corporate world in Asia can probably relate to. It comes from an international firm, with operations in Asia, but could easily have come from any firm in any part of the world. It was recounted to me by someone who had just witnessed the process below. The story was told in a totally matter-of-fact way, with little or no cynicism. The dry humour, of course, is palpable.

You will know that, every few months or so, big international firms with operations in Asia will have a visit from a very senior executive out of headquarters - generally the U.S. or Europe. It could even be the CEO or Chairman. We will call this person "Foreign Bigshot A".

Now, every multinational with operations in Asia also has a local head of the business. This person we will call "Local Bigshot B". It's important for Local Bigshot B to have face with his (or her) bosses from afar. Any visit from an important person is a great opportunity to show what's been going on. To be seen. To be noticed.

When Foreign Bigshot A decides to make a trip to Asia, Local Bigshot B thinks that he really should do something to impress Foreign Bigshot A. So, he calls all of his best client executives into his office and instructs them to set up meetings for Foreign Bigshot A and their very best clients.

The executives head off and, with some difficulty, arrange meetings between Foreign Bigshot A and their clients. This is quite difficult to do because their clients are busy people and really don't see much value in meeting with Foreign Bigshot A. However, they understand the importance of relationships and so agree to the meeting.

Now, Local Bigshot B forgot something quite important before sending the executives off to meet with these most important clients to set up meetings for Foreign Bigshot A. He forgot to ask Foreign Bigshot A if he (or she) had any other plans, or any other particular reason for visiting Asia. And, of course, there was another reason. A conference, maybe, or some other activity.

A short time after the last executive has successfully arranged meetings for Foreign Bigshot A, an e-mail arrives saying that Foreign Bigshot A has other agenda items so can't be available at the times arranged by the client executives. Local Bigshot B now has a whole lot of meetings set up with important clients, and these meetings will no longer work.

The next step is to try and retrieve the situation. Local Bigshot B immediately sends out a notice informing the executives of the change of plans, and asking them all to speak to their clients to rearrange the meeting times. Now, you will understand, these meetings were not

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at all easy to set up in the first place. The clients are important and busy people.

Nevertheless, the executives are brave and enterprising people, so they set out to do their very best. Many succeed, and although there is some attrition most of the meetings are rearranged.

Then comes the day of reckoning. It's a day with meetings packed so tightly that any slippage is going to be the beginnings of a disaster. Of course, you can't control the traffic, and if there's more than one person involved in anything there is bound to be slippage. The day of Delay Dominoes begins in earnest. Somewhere along the line a meeting ends late. This means that the next meeting starts late, which means that a very busy client is in the office waiting for this meeting (which has ALREADY been rearranged once or twice) and Foreign Bigshot A is LATE. It's definitely not a good idea to disrespect your clients in this way.

As you can imagine, the client is not at all happy. Clients don't like having their time wasted, especially when they have important things to do – like running their own business. This goes on through the day, each meeting starting later than the last as the dominoes knock each other over one-by-one. The 5 minutes late at the first meeting becomes 15 by the second and 25 minutes by the third. By the end of the day the handlers are in a complete sweat, wishing that teleportation was already invented.

What's worse is that strong client relationships have been ruffled by this lack of courtesy. If

the only problem was delay dominoes it could be fine, but there is an added dimension.

Foreign Bigshot A, for some strange reason, decides that it is important to talk to the clients about things that have little interest and no bearing on their own needs. Things like a reorganization in Foreign Bigshot A's home market, or a merger, or some other issue that is clearly topical for Foreign Bigshot A but which leave the client wondering "what's the point?" And, even worse, "you messed my schedule around and then you were late! For this?"

By this time, of course, Local Bigshot B knows that he is going to have very sore feet. That happens when you shoot yourself in the foot. He is, by and large, wishing that he hadn't bothered to set up these meetings. The attempt to look good in front of Foreign Bigshot A has backfired, and damaged relationships with the most important clients. And, at the end of the day, Local Bigshot B is judged on how well his business serves his clients.

After Foreign Bigshot A moves on to other markets, Local Bigshot B decides that he had better try to repair the situation. He starts making personal calls to the firms' most important clients in order to apologize.

The sad thing is, it's far too late. Many of them don't even return his call.

Things will get better when some time has passed, but the whole process leaves you wondering if there isn't maybe a better way? ●

