

BLIND LEAD BLIND

A woman with short dark hair is sitting at a wooden desk in a server room. She has her eyes closed and a neutral expression. The desk is cluttered with a computer monitor, keyboard, mouse, and various office supplies. In the background, there are rows of server racks with cables and network equipment. The lighting is dim, typical of a server room.

Ray Melnik

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Late one Sunday evening, Marcus and Annie were occupying the service support desks. Both thought to have another cup of coffee, but it was Marcus who reached over and began to pour for the both of them. Just then, Annie saw an alert appear on the screen and began addressing the request.

Marcus, handed the filled cup to Annie and asked, “So do you believe what the system managers told us at last week’s meeting?”

“You mean the Global Operations Center?”

“Yes. If anyone would know, it would be the system managers, don’t you think?”

“But most of the engineers and network architects don’t believe there is a GOC.”

“Well, I would tend to believe the managers.”

“But then why can’t we e-mail the Center directly?” Annie asked.

“There’s so much to monitor, but supposedly they see the communications that pass through. If they can help out, they do. There were a few times when systems came back from the brink and I bet they had a hand in it.”

“So, Marcus, I forget; how many people did they say work there?”

“At first they said only one, but soon acknowledged that there are three. There is the main shift, the relief and the overnight. The overnight is mostly there in spirit, though, since that position is on call.”

“Did the CIO give the managers these details?”

“She won’t say. I guess she wants to keep the managers guessing about whether they’re being watched. They read it in the site manuals down in the archives. It was cryptic, but it just took a careful read. At least, that’s what John’s father, Evan, said. You know him; he manages electronic records and the written archive material.”

“Well, I’d love to get a look at the archives,” Annie said.

“The managers removed all those books because they are rewriting the site manual. They need to remove the parts that are no longer relevant. Many of the ways we do things have changed a great deal.”

“So, why don’t they just analyze the production systems and develop new manuals based on observation?”

“They leave that to the engineers and architects. The site manual contains the general tips on how to do our jobs properly and outlines procedures. If we follow the recommendations from the site manual, we won’t be held responsible for any system failures.”

“That’s fine with me,” Annie said. I can go along. But what about exploring ways to make things better?”

“Managers will determine what’s needed over time and incorporate them into the site manual.”

“It seems to me that blindly following the site manual will result in stifling some really good ideas from employees.”

“But it sure makes things easier this way. So, Annie, what was that request you just picked up?”

“It’s about the network switches in the human resources area. Engineering reports that there are two that need repair. One is a more expensive unit and has a warranty. The other is an older unit and the warranty has expired. What do you think I should do?”

“Have the one under warranty repaired, but discard and replace the second. It’s nearing the end of its usable life anyway.”

“That sounds right. I’ll submit the request.”

It grew quiet for a short time before Marcus looked up to see someone through the glass wall along the hall, walking toward the door. Marcus nudged Annie’s shoulder.

She looked up and said, “That’s Max. I’ve talked with him in the cafeteria a few times. He’s one of the network engineers from the 13th floor. I really like him. He’s a nice guy.”

“Oh, really?” Marcus responded territorially.

Maxwell entered, giving a quick hello to Marcus, but quickly turned his attention toward Annie.

“Hi, Annie. So this is where you work,” Max commented. There’s a terminal upstairs that gets wired in the morning, but I need access to the core for a few minutes. Can I use one of yours?”

“Hi Max. Sure you can. You can use the one next to me.”

“Thanks,” Max said and logged out in order to log back in with elevated rights.

Marcus, having a bit of a crush on Annie, was becoming a little jealous watching Max and her conversing. He waited for a break in the conversation.

“So, Max, Annie and I were discussing the GOC. What do you think?”

“It would be nice to have someone monitoring the global health of our infrastructure and systems, but I haven’t seen anything yet to make me believe the managers are right. They’re a little too insistent, given that they have no real evidence for it.”

“But what can you say about the site manual from the archives?”

“They were written years ago, before there were all the new developments in the technology. I hardly consider it a worthy source.”

“That’s just like you engineers. You don’t believe anything.”

“Marcus, please,” Annie cut in.

Max responded, “It’s OK, Annie. He’s right in one way, but wrong that I don’t believe anything. I simply need to see some evidence, if I’m to accept it. I have an open mind, but not if there isn’t anything to back up their claims.”

“But there will always be unknowns,” Marcus added. “Thousands of people are sending information back and forth, controlling systems and monitoring processes; yet all of the information knows exactly where to go. It’s like clockwork. There can be no other explanation given all the complexity.”

“The pieces are individual contributions that were developed over time. It wasn’t always so complex. We saw it grow from

a simple network to what we have today. Over the years, programs were improved. Ones that fit well in our environment were retained and developed, while others were failures that were soon discarded. There are far more programs, processes and systems that have gone away in the effort than what is in use. That's why it all works so well now."

"So you don't think there's someone looking at the global picture and guiding development?"

"No, I don't. The development is guided by all of us collectively. Each and every one of us has a chance to contribute and make the system better," Max responded.

Sounding annoyed, Annie said, "Marcus, why don't you leave Max alone? You don't see eye to eye. Why don't you just leave it at that?"

"Because; no offense Max, it seems you engineers think you know more than the rest of us, but you can't prove there's no GOC."

"True; but that's a false argument. No one can prove something doesn't exist, when it doesn't exist. But it's not up to me to prove it doesn't. I'm not making any claims, you are. We don't claim to know everything, but in our line of work, we have the tools to see the clockwork right down to the structure of each data packet. There's no mystery about why it all works so well."

"How's that?"

"With a protocol analyzer, we see inside the packets. Parts of the structure tell the packets where to go, other parts contain the data itself. Together these have all the information and instructions needed to form the video you request, or say, the

webpage you wish to view. There's no great mystery there and I would be happy to show you, if you stop by the test lab."

"That's OK. I'll pass. It still doesn't prove that there's no GOC."

"But it does explain why one would not be needed. Thanks for the use of the terminal. The offer is open, if you want to see it all for yourself."

Max turned to Annie and nodded goodbye. As he left, she turned toward Marcus and just stared as silent moments passed.

Marcus finally spoke, "What? I told you they think they know everything."