

The outside review

*In which ... the biometrics group selects an
“outside insider” ...*

A Proposal Appears

The Nun (working alone, of course) had come up with a plan for determining the response of managed forests to the newest fad in silviculture. It was a beautiful thing. It used sophisticated symbols from alphabets that nobody recognized¹. It had equations that spanned entire pages. There was even an appendix on the different possible variance estimators. At one point there was a discussion of “Bayesian folding” and there was the frequent use of matrix algebra. She was surprised to find resistance to such a beautiful proposal, and yet it happened.

As in any typical company, the moderately high cost was given maximum attention and the benefits were considered lightly (because everyone knew that such benefits were often wishful thinking). Because of The Nun’s connections, her proposal floated up quicker and higher than its quality might deserve, and caught the eye of people who were generally ignorant of these issues. A senior manager, advised by an astute connection, called for a meeting of people who *ought* to know about these things. The usual suspects were assembled.

The Nun’s carefully constructed plan was not acceptable yet. The manager was not certain enough. There was a polite but cautious tone in the brief discussion. Vi offered to go through the math again, but the manager declined. She was offended. The Kid was amused. OH was quiet. He had

¹ Θ , \aleph , ζ and \wp , for instance, all of which are pronounced “squiggle” or “something” in most readers minds. How did *you* pronounce them mentally as you just read them? Do I make my point? It’s not sophisticated. It’s stupid. Don’t do it.

been in this situation before. He also knew that the proposal was mostly hot air and too much enthusiasm in pursuit of a very small idea.

The decision was delivered briefly and clearly. The proposal would be reviewed by an *outside* consultant before it went anywhere. The team would meet to specify the items to be covered, and then give a list of possible reviewers to the manager who would make a final choice. End of meeting.

The next gathering of the group revolved around an agenda OH proposed - simply because nobody else brought one. He also wrote up the meeting notes, so that the decisions did not mutate later.

Topic #1 : Why are we doing this ?

“This is a bit silly”, sniffed The Nun. “I have already checked these techniques with Dr. Smiley and Dr. Newguy who is one of the leading specialists on Bayesian folding, because he recently did his PhD thesis on this topic. I have personally read that thesis”, she said, “and I think it is brilliant²”. “Everyone says he is a real Wizard in this field”.

“A Wizard, is he ?” mused OH. “Well ... perhaps a Magician. Wizards are pretty thin on the ground, and sometimes it might be hard to tell the difference right away – but they *are* different. If you don’t know difference, Vi, – you’ve only known Magicians”.

“Moving on,” said OH, “what is it that the manager *really* wants to get from this ?”. “Obviously he wants to know if the techniques are correct”, said Vi. “We need an outside reviewer to tell him that I am right.”

“Oh, I rather doubt that”, said OH. “What he really needs to know is whether this is a *smart* thing to do, which is quite a different issue. Just about anyone who wanted to put in the time could find out if these techniques were correct – whether they are *wise* is a much different issue, and requires more serious and more experienced people to be considered³. Even if it is technically correct, the real question here is *should it be done*. Is the game worth the candle, Vi ? – that’s the issue”.

“This is the most advanced technique available”, she persisted, “and if you *read* the literature, you would *know* that”, she added (somewhat

² She was not honest enough to admit that she did not understand most of it, and therefore copied large sections directly into her proposal. Complicated material may *sometimes* be necessary, *usually* indicates confusion, but is *never* brilliant.

³ The Nun was vaguely offended by this, and sensed that the friendly reviewer *she* had in mind was slipping away.

petulantly). There was a brief stillness in the room. OH let it hang in the air for a moment, and then moved on as if nothing had been said.

“The fact that it is new is part of the problem, Vi. Since many techniques have no track record it is hard to tell whether they will lead to good things or bad. I think we now agree that what the manger needs to know here is ‘is this smart to do’, not ‘is this correct’. That is why we will put it *in those words*, to our reviewer. **The business is full of dumb and expensive projects which went down the drain because somebody did not make this basic distinction.** Even if it is correct and useful, can that manager explain the results to anyone else? You must admit, the current format is difficult, at best.” “But Dr. Newguy is the expert in these things”, said Vi. “How could anyone question what he says?”

“Perhaps because *they* are at risk here, and *he* is not”, replied OH. “*The* expert, you say? Well, that is hard to believe. Did this idea come out of nowhere? More likely the topic was suggested by his major professor, or quite possibly traveled in from another field⁴. Is it really likely that this recent graduate is the *only* one that could pick up on this new idea, or would have the best notion of whether it has real potential?”

“That does, however, lead us to the next agenda topic”.

Topic #2 : Who should do the review ?

“Well, if there really is not much experience with these techniques inside *our* particular field, how can we find a consultant that could do a good job?” asked The Kid, quite reasonably.

“It’s even more important, in that case, to look for some gray hair and battle scars”, said OH. “People who have been around the block a few times have a feel for these things, quite apart from knowing the specific approaches, and they have a network of friends and students who can tell them these things – and they use it. Take George, for instance. He is a sharp cookie. He has a large group of former graduate students that watch for anything really promising, and he knows the general trends of the business. He will not be stopped or fooled by the math here, and he is experienced in dealing with this sort of thing. He knows where the bodies are buried in many national projects from the past, and why they went down in flames.”

⁴ .. “...possibly because it had come to a natural dead-end” OH was tempted to add.

“He has not published for years” complained the Nun (who did not know George, except by his reputation) “so I question whether he is the best person to judge this very recent approach”.

“True”, agreed OH. “He gives many of his best ideas to his students who get credit for publishing, because George is far past that sort of thing. Meanwhile he does outside consulting in many places and knows how to talk to senior people and soothe anxiety. He also knows when he is downwind of something that smells wrong”. They eventually agreed that George was to be the primary suggestion, followed by a few people of lesser ability.

Topic #3 : What does the manager need ?

“Obviously, he needs to make sure this technique is right ... *and wise* as well, *I admit*”, said Vi, “but I have already done that, I think. I cannot understand why a manager who will never comprehend the technical ideas doesn’t just take our word for it”.

“Because you do not sign your name to documents determining asset values for the company”, said OH, “or to those that have potential legal repercussions. You are not expected to exercise due diligence in regard to assets that are potential loan collateral. With accountants going to jail in the last few years, might not managers or biometricians be next ? He is looking for expert advice to gain legal and institutional protection. He does not want to be known as the Bozo that got us into an expensive mudhole involving a fad that went away before the costs were even totaled.”

“Just for our own purposes, perhaps we could ask the manager some specific questions” offered The Kid. “OK”, said OH, “how about these ?” :

- ✓ How high does the review go (where does the technical buck stop and the political buck get carried forward) ?
- ✓ Who has to trust this review ? Who is the decision maker ?
Can we retain someone who *he* personally trusts ?
- ✓ How wide will the distribution be for this report ?
Who gets to see the report besides the manager ?
Could it be used against him by his internal competition ?
- ✓ Is the review confidential ?⁵

⁵ It certainly would not be to the courts (if it ever came to that). Under “discovery” they will get everything, even deleted emails from the corporate backup files.

- ✓ What would he consider a perfect review ?
Perhaps it would just say yes or no.
Perhaps it teaches the manager a bit about the current trends,
or about the people who proposed it.
Maybe he cares about the economics – maybe not.
- ✓ What should not get said in the report ?
Some messages should be delivered in private – which ones ?
The company lawyer may not want *any* written comments
that are not absolutely necessary.

“There is no way I can imagine him putting these answers on paper” said The Kid. “Quite right” said OH, “so we will have to ask this in person, perhaps over a lunch where he feels comfortable and informal. We may have to get it through a third party, because he may not feel comfortable discussing this with any of us.”

“At any rate, let’s get on to the next topic ...”

Topic #4 : What is the benefit to the Company ?

“Well”, said the Nun, “the company is seen to do some sort of due diligence internally. The manager is protected because he is following good technical advice” (*wise technical advice, OH interrupted to say*) “and the proposal moves up one level from where the issue is correctness, to where issues of priority, cost-benefit, or political issues are involved.”

“Well summarized”, said OH. “You show promise, Vi. The whole process is also slowed down a bit, which is often a benefit in itself. I think you have put the issues into perspective here right away.”

“I think we may also be sharing credit or fixing blame with this process”, said The Kid, who also was thinking about the bigger issues now. The Nun began to contemplate the same idea (with some discomfort).

“Good point”, said OH, “which leads us to the final topic. How about looking after *ourselves* a bit when this guy comes to visit ?”

Topic #5 : What is the benefit to us ?

“Why would we have him actually travel here personally ?” said Vi, who instinctively saw this as a situation where she would not be at center court. “And what benefit is this review to us” asked Vi, “other than the fact that some of our time might be saved ?” (*or we might get blamed, she thought*).

”Plenty”, said OH. “This is a chance to see some of the larger picture in our profession⁶. When our consultant comes to visit, we will drag him around to some research groups and universities for a day or two. The manager will probably foot the bill, and we will look like local heroes who are sharing an opportunity. Some of the issues or history brought out by other professionals and students will be interesting and broadening. It will be fun too.”

“The manager needs to hear some of these things firsthand, and look this guy in the eye to judge his character. You know how hard it is for managers at his level to ever get a straight story. The consultant needs to talk to us firsthand as well. Even if he agrees that this is a good idea he still has to know whether *we* are the people to pull it off⁷”.

“This is our chance to introduce an ‘outside insider’ as Peter Drucker calls them. It’s easy to get tunnel vision in any organization - to float along with the current and with your thinking limited by the local culture. Sometimes you need someone that you control and trust (the insider part), to confidentially give you a broader vision of other ideas and trends (the outsider part). We might as well pick someone who will serve this educational aspect for those of us doing biometrics. Some say that the Mafia (which is a kind of family business) uses their lawyers in this capacity. Technical groups in a business sometimes form a kind of ‘family view’ that needs to be broadened by these outsiders.”

“In addition, the field staff will get a look at someone that they would normally not meet. His comments will either increase or decrease their opinion of our own viewpoints, but the chances are that he will handle it discreetly and we will *all* look better after the experience. At a minimum, you can get some reprints and books signed by someone that will increase the value of your library some time in the future. At a maximum, we will get a heads-up about some current ideas in the business and make some friends.”

“Well” said the Nun, “we can already get much of that from the literature”. “On the contrary”, said OH, “most of what can be learned from really senior people will *never* be written down, as a matter of courtesy in some cases and sometimes because of moderate confidentiality. Blunt views on serious topics are best delivered verbally, as they usually are inside this company. Our consultant knows that if you keep your mouth shut in an organization you learn a great deal (but cannot repeat it, or the input stops). He can give us some good advice based on information he will not reveal.

⁶ Vi rather thought SHE was the big picture in advancing the profession, but The Kid could see some possible things to learn.

⁷ Vi knew perfectly well that “we” would not be the target of that judgment.

Some insights are received only when sitting at the right feet or being in the right rooms. *Nothing* replaces a quiet chat at a corner table or a free-wheeling discussion among specialists with a technical interest. Certainly reading the literature will *not* do that.”

Topic #6 : What should the report contain ?

The Nun was looking concerned about any formal report that would be made, but OH plowed ahead. “We have established that part of the report will be verbal, without any paper trail. What specific subjects should we require to be covered in the rest of the report ?”

“Personally, I suggest that we present these topics as discussion or briefing items for the reviewer during his site visit. That way he can choose to address these specific topics (or not) when he prepares the report. If *we* want specific things covered we can ask him to insert these where he thinks best. The *manager* will be happy just to see the topic list, and if he insists on an outline for the report we can finalize that after the site visit, and after our consultant gets a look around. The manager may just want the whole thing to go away quietly without any report at all”, suggested OH, “not that this is likely (he added, diplomatically)”. “Well, that could be seen as an embarrassing waste of money”, said Vi. “In that case”, The Kid chimed in, “we simply say that the visit was to update us on current methods and trends in the profession, and the seminars were worth that expense. Everybody is covered.”

“What if he says the idea is a dog, and it should be dropped ?”, asked the Nun in a rare example of candor. “Well, he will probably just say (in print) that the time is not right or some such phrasing, unless the manager requests otherwise. The really critical comments will probably come informally and personally, but everyone is better off avoiding a disaster at this stage rather than later.” Somehow, The Nun sensed that she was getting good advice here, and the meeting came to an end.

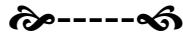


The suggestions from the group went to the manager, and very quickly through the back door to Dr. Smiley and a few of The Nun's friends. The general view from Smiley's sector was that the suggested names might be awkward to deal with.

Soon after this, a memo went up the ladder from the Nun's side of the organization suggesting that "*recent developments supporting this potential project are unfolding in the academic world, and perhaps it should be put on hold until these newest methods can be suitably harnessed*". Vi had volunteered to keep in touch with Dr. Newguy and monitor the pulse of these exciting developments. Meantime, the project, the review, and the close examination that went with it could be put off for a few more budget cycles – at which time this very good idea would almost certainly look even better.

Their wish was granted ...

And eventually the project vanished entirely ...



That summer, George came to review a different project that OH and the inventory group were developing. This included the dinners, visits and seminars that had been discussed by the group.

Vi was busy doing "important things" and did not get to most of these events, but The Kid had enough good sense to wallow right in the middle of it all. He learned a great deal, and the personal contacts paid off for many years.

Note to readers ... the next chapter is about how to float ideas around inside an organization.