

Extract from Breaking the Mould by Peter Hunter

Chapter 8 - A Moving Story

There was one operation on the rig that I had never seen. That was the rig move. When all the wells on one site have been drilled the whole rig, the generators, the accommodation, the third party service companies, everything was packed up and moved bodily through the jungle to the next location where the whole drilling cycle would start again.

I had been on leave when the rig was moved and when I came back the crews were reassembling everything to recommence drilling. I checked the log and saw that the move which had been budgeted for two days, had actually taken five.

The drilling contractor had flown in their rig move specialist, Eric Hoffman. He came from Germany for the event. His full time job was moving rigs. When he arrived he naturally took charge, and was still on site so I spoke to him about the operation and how he thought it had gone.

Eric said he was quite pleased. It had been difficult and he had not had much sleep but he thought that everybody had worked hard and with the exception of a few mechanical breakdowns the operation had progressed well. When I asked him about the time it had taken, he did not seem too concerned that it had taken three days more than planned. Eric said that the rig manager always set impossible times, so it took as long as it took.

I left Eric with Werner and went to put the times for the move up on the gate where all of the performance graphs were displayed for the crew to see. I waited while the next crew bus arrived. They came off the bus and went straight to the new graph where they started an animated discussion amongst themselves. I gave them a few minutes to get changed then went to meet them at the Charla. Normally there was a good deal of banter and joking at these meetings but today there was an atmosphere. I asked them to tell me what they were concerned about. The floodgates opened and they all started shouting at once how it was unfair to measure the time of the rig move because it wasn't their fault.

They told me how Eric had arrived two days before the move and had not talked to anyone about what he proposed to do or how he proposed to do it. When the day to move arrived he came on site and just started telling everyone what to do. The sub contractor brought in to handle the move had turned up with the wrong trucks and when one of them broke down they could not do anything for half a day until a new one arrived because each load had to be moved in the correct order. When one load could not be moved due to a breakdown it held up the whole operation. If Eric was not physically on site, when he was eating or sleeping, the whole operation ground to a halt because if he was not personally directing nobody else could. He was the only person who knew the plan because it was all in his head.

The meeting was rapidly degenerating into a shouting match as all of their frustrations came out. I allowed it to go on for a few minutes and then the driller stood up to quieten the crew down. As the last of the shouting died away I asked the driller what was the one detail which would have made the move better for them.

He looked around the crew for a few moments in silence then said, "We should have been told the plan."

Having talked to Eric, I knew that there was no plan other than what was in Eric's head, so I asked the crew where they thought they could get this plan from.

The driller looked around at the faces of the crew then said, "We could make one" and looking around the crew I could see from their faces that this was something that they were all happy with. After that, at every Charla for the next three weeks there was only one topic of conversation and that was "The Plan." Each crew took up from where the last one left off and they started to dissect the operation.

First was the order that the equipment had to be moved. What had to be left to last and what could be moved before drilling stopped. How many loads there were, how many people were needed to prepare, load and unload each one. Then how many trucks were needed and when did they need them, what happened if they lost a truck. Slowly the crew built the plan up until every piece of equipment had been accounted for and could be traced through the plan from decommissioning on one site through to re-commissioning on the new site, when it was going to happen, who was going to do it and what equipment was required to make it happen.

The crews created their plan on the board in their shack and every shift I would transfer the new plan to the computer and brief Werner on the progress they were making.

Werner recognised immediately the power of what was happening. He'd had his lesson and now he could see the crews getting involved in an operation which in normal circumstances he himself would leave to the expert who was flown in for the purpose. The project was now maturing and I was able to leave more and more to the crews. They were enjoying being in control and Werner was enjoying the freedom it gave him to run the rig instead of standing over them in every little task.

This is the time when my work was done. The change was apparent and the crew were in charge of their own rig.

Werner understood how the change had occurred and what he had to do to support it. The time was close for me to leave.

As I packed for the last time I got a call from Willie. I always stopped to see him on the way out of the country but this time he asked me if he could bring the crews' plan for the rig move.

I had asked Werner to start attending the Charlas and for the last few days I stopped going while he finished off the plan with the crews. I met Willie in El Tigre and with him were the contractors who were due to supply the trucks and moving equipment for the next rig move.

The contractors were a worried bunch, as the last move had taken so long, some of the delays definitely being their fault, that Willie had withheld part of their payment. Their long faces suggested that they were expecting more bad news.

Without any preamble Willie introduced me and told the contractors that I was going to tell them how to move the rig next time. I looked up at Willie as he said this and saw that he realised what he had done.

He looked sheepish.

It was taking some getting used to, to understand how unproductive “telling” people what to do really was.

At least Willie understood and was trying.

With my happy face on I introduced myself to the three contractors in turn then suggested that we all had a coffee before we made a start. This broke the ice and a few minutes later we sat down to start again. I asked the contractor what they thought they could do differently next time to try to get a better result for the rig move. They went quiet for a moment then the boss, Enrique, said that he didn't see what he could do differently, he just supplied the trucks he was told to supply and did what he was told by the rig-move specialist, Eric.

I asked if he would like to take a look at an idea which the crews had been working on that might make a difference. Unfolding the printout of the crews' plan I started to run through it with the contractors. In no time at all they took over the floor, and were talking so fast and excitedly that I lost the thread of their Spanish and could barely understand what they were saying. The contractors had caught on immediately to the value of the plan and were out of their seats crowding around the table to get a better look.

Sitting back, I let them get on with it. I looked across at Willie and caught the ghost of a wink through his smile. My attention was dragged back to the table, where it's contractors were asking about a spare line in the plan which did not seem to connect with anything else. I explained that this was the spare truck, the crews' idea. The truck had its own work to do but none of the loads were dependent on anything else. If another truck broke down then this truck could be taken immediately from its task to take over until another truck came from their base.

Any disruption would be minimal and when the new truck arrived the spare could go back to its allotted tasks. Having been penalised for lost time due to mechanical breakdowns during the last move the contractors could appreciate that this was a clear and valuable change to the operation.

I lost track of their conversation again and suddenly they were all leaving. Willie told me that they were going to fetch their boss.

Fifteen minutes later they were back with the roundest man I have ever seen. It was clear why he didn't get out much. He was assisted into a chair and prepared himself to be convinced. I motioned to Enriques to speak and the party started again.

Two hours later Willie and Enriques had agreed all of the logistical details and the contract was passed to Señora Santa, Willie's secretary, for typing.

There was one more stop to make. I had a few hours before my flight from El Tigre and Willie asked if I would mind accompanying him to the offices of the field manager.

These were the offices in which four months earlier Willie had been told in no uncertain terms that if the performance of the rig did not improve they could pack up and take it back to Europe. Willie was clearly looking forward to this visit.

Pablo Lopez was the field manager, who in my four months in the field I had never met.

Willie introduced me as the consultant who had been helping them on the rig and left it at that. Pablo was clearly still thinking of his last conversation when he had threatened to remove Willie and was giving all the signals of a man who was too busy to be bothered with excuses and had to move on to more important things.

I said nothing and waited for him to open the conversation. If he was so busy he would have to say something just to get rid of us.

Finally Pablo asked what it was that I did, in a tone that said, "I don't really care, I just want to get this conversation over and you out of my office."

I told him that I did absolutely nothing, and waited for Pablo to speak again. After an elongated pause Pablo said, "You must have done something, you have been on the rig for the last four months." Now he was actually asking so I told him that the people who had actually "Done something" were the crew.

Did he want to see what it was that the crew had done?

This time Pablo gave up and smiled, he knew when he had been beaten. "Yes," he said, "Show me what the crews have done." He put his pen down then sat back with folded arms to listen. I had graphics with me which had been prepared for Willie as part of the end of project package but, as there was no projector and no slides, I referred to the printout of the project report.

It was a simple story about the crew astonishing everybody with the speed that they skidded the rig, how they wrote their own procedures to use the grabber and the difference that made, how they ran casing as fast as it had ever been run in the world and how they did it time after time.

It was about the crews taking control of moving the rig from site to site. It was about creating the conditions for ownership and what happened when the crews took it.

The presentation lasted less than twenty minutes, simply outlining what had happened and why.

At the end of it the first question Pablo asked was how long I could stay for. I had intended spending some more time with Willie before getting on the plane but looking at Willie I could tell that this was where he wanted me to spend that time.

I told Pablo that if we went straight to the airport I could stay for another two hours, maximum.

Pablo asked if I was prepared to give the presentation again and whether he could make the graphics into slides. He disappeared and coffee was brought in, then a projector, and finally a girl arrived and took the project report away to produce the slides.

Pablo came back after twenty minutes, almost as if he was checking that Willie and I were still there. After another twenty minutes he ushered in two Americans. I recognised them as the rig managers, essentially doing Willie's job, for two competing drilling contractors in the same field.

Pablo sat down, introduced them and asked me to start again.

This time I was using the slides and the show went well. At the end he could see some concern on the two newcomers' faces."

Where is this going?

What has this got to do with us?"

I had an idea where it was going, and sat down and left the floor to Pablo. He pulled no punches and, predictably, told them that if they did not start to do with their rigs what Willie had done with his they could pack up and go home to the United States. I left Venezuela for the last time that evening. I was happy that in Willie and Werner I had left people who understood when to let go and have faith in the ability of others, people who understood and had seen first hand the futility of trying to maintain control by telling people what to do.

They had seen the difference and I felt sure that their crews were in good hands.

Pablo told the two other contractors that they should hire me, but they didn't. Why should they?

If Pablo had asked them how they thought they could improve then perhaps they would have suggested hiring me for themselves.

Instead Pablo was telling them what to do and they easily found reasons why they should not.

We have already seen the way that humans react when they are told what to do and the contractors' reaction was perfectly normal.

I phoned Werner later that month from a new project I was starting in the North Sea.

He told me that when Eric had arrived to move the rig he had once again slipped into the role of controller and started to run the rig move to his own secret agenda.

The crews through the drillers had demanded a meeting and had explained their plan to Eric.

Eric was amazed, as in all his experience he had never seen a plan to move a rig before and he agreed that the crews had a much better way.

Now at the beginning of each eight-hour shift Eric would sit down with the whole crew at the Charla to discuss progress so far and the plan for the next eight hours.

The rig move was accomplished in two and a half days, including the time it took to replace two of the trucks that broke down.

I was happy. The crew were looking after themselves and the managers were supporting the crews. They had got it right.

There are plenty of people left like Pablo and the other rig managers. Most of us are those people.

It takes a little thought and a lot of faith to make the first step from "Telling" people what to do to "Asking" what they think would work best.

Once that step is made and the amazing power of people becomes apparent, it is a very easy change to accept.

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