A New Recruit Writes Home From Boot Camp: Over the bridge and through the net1

By M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP

Dear Folks,

Well here I am in AtomicTangerine Boot Camp, which began here in the Alameda CA office on Monday the 8th of May and runs through Friday the 12th. I'm really excited but also a bit scared; everyone says that we won't have time to do anything else during this training, so I'd better get to sleep right away. I'll try to write a few words for you every day if I can.

MONDAY

We were warned that Boot Camp would be tough, but reality has outpaced speculation.

Today we started at 07:30 and finished at midnight (one team actually had to work until 03:00). During the day we have been subjected to the harshest, most punishing training known outside the US Navy SEAL training, as portrayed in that wonderful movie we've seen so many times, G.I. Jane. I don't know what the attrition rate is going to be, but it wouldn't surprise me to find more than half the recruits dropping out by the end of the training, just like in the movie.

The abuse is incredible. We have had to participate in seminars about our company's mission, vision, functional areas, management structures and policies with all of the top brass in the organization. The president of the company, Jonathan Fornaci, is possibly one of the brightest, most motivating people I've ever heard, and his colleagues have been at the same level. Tom Nelson, the Chief Strategy Officer, blew us away with his rapid-fire analysis of emerging technology, much of it from our parent organization, the SRI think-tank. It really is leaving us breathless from exertion as we try to keep up with these folks. I know that some of my fellow trainees are wondering if we can live up to the standards of the company we've signed up with.

The really novel aspect of our company is the notion of Venture Consulting, in which we effectively form alliances with our customers and help them build systems with measurable benefits. If we do our job right, we share a portion of those benefits in cash or even in equity. Very interesting approach to consulting work – really gets us to think long-term about the work our customers are doing and how to make the best of all our joint efforts.

This afternoon we had a particularly grueling exercise in which we had to form pairs and help each other stretch, and then we had to tell each other about the most embarrassing mistake in our professional careers. I told my partner all about the time in 1983 when I recommended that a customer buy two more master disk drives for their Hewlett-Packard 3000 mini-computer and discovered when the \$25,000 units arrived on site that there was a maximum of two masters per general I/O channel – boy was that ever embarrassing. Luckily HP refused to accept my resignation. My partner didn't have any embarrassing mistakes at all in her career, but she only told me that at the end of my little story.

¹ This article was originally published in the ACM Ubiquity in 2000 when the author was working for AtomicTangerine and was posted at $< \frac{\text{http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/views/m_kabay_2.html}}{\text{http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/views/m_kabay_2.html}} > .$

TUESDAY

As part of the training, each Boot Camp serves a particular charity; Boot Camps 1 through 4 worked on the Meals-On-Wheels organization, and their handiwork is visible at that Web site, <<u>http://www.mowsf.org>.</u> I hope that our platoon will be able to match their awesome results.

Our charity is NEADS, the National Education for Assistance Dog Services. Today we wrote up a description of the project for our report. I thought you might like to read it the first few paragraphs:

Atomic Tangerine, Inc. chooses charitable organization as the focus of its Boot Camp training sessions. For the sessions beginning on May 8, 2000, Atomic Tangerine chose to work with the National Education for Assistance Dog Services (NEADS). NEADS is a successful non-profit organization providing disabled people who are not blind with assistance dogs. The highly-trained dogs serve a wide range of functions starting with companionship, warnings of various dangers, support for ambulatory clients, and even fetching various objects such as telephones or drinks for their owners. NEADS specializes in facility-based training of dogs and their owners (known as dog/client teams). The organization arranges for puppies to be raised as assistance dogs; many of these puppies are saved from euthanasia at Humane Societies around the USA. There are 15 regional contact points (often volunteer families) around the country who coordinate with puppy foster parents. Dogs are trained by four trainers who are located in several parts of the USA. However, all the coordination of trained dogs and their prospective owners is carried out at the central facility in Massachusetts - a 12-acre homestead with modern kennels, training rings, and residence space for the roughly five clients who attend two-week sessions. Since its founding in 1976, NEADS has trained 650 dogs.

This document summarizes the initial findings, discussions of strategic issues, and preliminary discussions of possible support for NEADS. It serves as an overview of the project for the client and for subsequent Boot Camp teams from AtomicTangerine.

The initial team analyzed the needs of our client in five major areas: client recruitment and support; donor recruitment and retention; volunteer recruitment and management; trainer support; e-store; and technical issues.

Anyway, we're having a blast. The charity is benefitting from the combined brainpower of 18 experienced information technologists from many disciplines. The billing for the work accomplished would have been completely beyond the budget of the charity. We're thrilled to be able to benefit from the group work while helping a worthy cause at the same time. You'll be able to see the results of our work after later Boot Camp platoons have done their part of the job.

WEDNESDAY

Today, after a few hours of sleep, we did some peculiar exercises like building a bridge out of paper, foam-board, string, dowels, tiny medicine cups, and lots of duct tape. We were split into two teams. Each team was further divided into two workgroups, and there were point penalties (costs) for

communications via radio and even larger costs for actual site visits to the other half of the team. We had only a few minutes for joint planning, and we quickly identified those of us with an engineering background. They became the designers. Each working group had a chief engineer, and they decided quickly on the design and the dimensions of each half of the bridge. We bustled madly in our separate work areas and made only two two-minute radiophone calls to the other section of the team and sent the Chief Engineer out to the other site for a quick inspection. By the time we finished, our two halves actually did fit together, although one end was the equivalent of 20 feet off the ground. The other team's bridge was much more impressive than ours, except for the 45-degree angle of the on and off ramps.

THURSDAY

We had a really tough assignment today. We had to listen to a nice lady telling us how to introduce people to each other, how to put out a place setting for a formal dinner, and how to eat politely. Many of us nearly fainted from exhaustion as we tried to keep the names of the 17 different kinds of utensils she showed us. I've never seen so many different shapes of forks in my life.

In the afternoon, we all went outside to a long section of lawn marked out with little orange cones. There was a tree inside this rectangular area, and our instructions were to transfer two buckets from each end to the other but without touching the buckets or entering the forbidden zone. Our tools were pieces of rope, straps, and strings. On top of each bucket was a shallow bowl holding three eggs painted in gold. The buckets could be placed only on one of two rubber disks inside the forbidden zone before ending up at their destinations, and there were penalties for spilling the eggs onto the grass. We saw the solution to that one within the first five seconds, but it took us a long time to get the job done. The really tough part was getting around the tree.

FRIDAY

On this last day, we all went out to a big redwood forest where we played games and solved puzzles. Our group started with the requirement to get everyone across a bottomless chasm (actually it was just a sand-pit, but we had to pretend it was bottomless) using a box on either side and two boards, neither of which was long enough to extend across the chasm. We solved that one quickly enough and went to the next in the series of puzzles.

This next challenge was a demand to move a golf ball from one position to its destination, some 50 feet away, using an assortment of foam-rubber insulation, tubes, and pieces of wood with various cross-sectional shapes – all without stopping the ball. The other team left us a note that said, "Try to get it done in less than two minutes" so we were proud to finish it in 90 seconds. However, when we met again, it turned out that they'd done the task in 30 seconds.

Another interesting experience was a kind of blind man's buff where we worked in pairs. One of us would start blindfolded and have the other guide us in the task of picking up letters without touching various obstacles. Then we switched roles. We quickly realized that the blindfolded person should move in very small steps and that the guider should provide constant feedback and very precise instructions phrased from the point of view of the searcher. Everyone did very well in this exercise and it was interesting seeing the two VPs being directed by people of a much lower

organizational level. Mind you, AtomicTangerine is a pretty flat hierarchy, so maybe it wasn't as big a deal as in some other, more deeply hierarchical company. I certainly enjoyed how friendly and casual all the upper managers were.

Perhaps the weirdest experience of the day was having to get everyone through a meshwork barrier without touching the meshwork. We started by deciding who would fit through which of the variously-sized holes in the mesh and in what order. We then passed team members through the barrier one by one; each person had to try to be as still and as straight as possible. The passers had to be gentle and coordinated to avoid hitting the sides of the holes. I was particularly impressed by the honesty of all my new platoon mates: we immediately announced any error (touching the netting) and backed out the passee to start again. It was an interesting experience for all concerned because of the level of trust involved, especially for the passees.

SATURDAY

Golly, folks, it's the end of Boot Camp already, and I'm coming home. I thought when I went into this training that the fun and games would have little effect on me. However, I am shocked to discover that I actually did get to like my fellow platoon members more quickly than I ever could have without these experiences. I felt genuinely sorry to see my new friends go at the end of the day and I certainly have a very high opinion of their intelligence and competence.

From an organizational psychology perspective, I'd say that the key lessons everyone learned were the importance of

- defining goals clearly;
- planning quickly;
- communicating clearly throughout the process of solving a problem;
- taking on any function as required rather than worrying about job titles;
- thinking outside conventional limitations and assumptions.

Hmm, I wonder if we could use this kind of technique in other areas of our lives. Do you think maybe Auntie Ruth and Auntie Beth could solve their fifty-year feud if we passed them through a net? And do you figure maybe we could have the Republicans and the Democrats working on building bridges together?

Well that's all for now. I'll see you back home on the farm soon.

Love,

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