

## *Silk Magnolia*

### **Part I**

Stunned pause.

“If this helps you to take your mind off what’s happening out there, then let’s continue with this call. If this is the last thing you want to do, that’s 100% okay. Let’s regroup once you’ve reached wherever you are heading to.”

I remember saying this to Adrian\*, the project lead from my systems integrator (SI) team on March 1, 2022. He was dialed into our weekly stand-up call in his car, racing away from the shell-flecked air of Kyiv.

“Let’s keep going,” Adrian said, “I want... a distraction.”

The weeks that unfolded surely changed the lives of the Ukrainian staff of the SI team my company contracted to re-platform the loyalty technology for one of our marquee brands. It also left an indescribable mark on me, as a manager and as a global citizen.

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Flash further back to December 2021. As the de facto Global Head of Loyalty at multinational consumer packaged goods conglomerate Reckitt Benckiser Group plc (commonly known as “Reckitt”; house of 200+ brands including Lysol, Dettol, Enfamil, and Durex), I was riding high on my success so far, having just launched three new consumer-facing loyalty programs and program augmentations in Mexico, Philippines, and Malaysia, all from the command center of my bedroom office in New Jersey. I felt confident that I could take the learnings from these projects to my new project: re-platforming the loyalty technology currently used for our Schiff Vitamins portfolio (brands: Airborne, Neuriva, MegaRed, Move Free, and Digestive Advantage) loyalty program in my home country, the United States. Over the last couple of months, I had built a great relationship with the business lead, Myra\*, as well as with the new technology provider that I just implemented in Mexico, Philippines, and Malaysia. I had not worked with the project’s external SI team before, but I knew that Reckitt has had great success with them on other projects. Moreover, my conversations with the SI lead, Adrian, reassured me of his team’s competencies. I fully expected that we would be able to re-platform the program by March 31, 2022, the end of our contract with Schiff Vitamins’ legacy loyalty technology provider.

I could not have been more wrong.

My second-hand witnessing the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine was not my first exposure to social, political, or economic conflicts at scale. My parents were college students through the time of the Tiananmen Square protests notably in Beijing

and in 400 other cities across my native China. Their hope for a better life eventually led to our leaving Beijing for, unconventionally, rural Mississippi in the United States. I grew up as part of the <1% of Asians in the Jim Crow-scarred state and in its poverty-stricken Delta, monikered “a Third World country in the heart of America” (Parfit, 1993, p.36). I fought my way to opportunities beyond my state’s borders and earned admission to one of the world’s most elite colleges. Throughout my college years, I volunteered my skills to serve disenfranchised immigrant communities in the greater Boston, Massachusetts area and started my post-college career in immigration law, specializing in working with asylum seekers, refugees, special immigrant juveniles, and survivors under U.S. Violence of Women Act. I partnered with clients who have experienced torture for speaking out against corrupt governments or practicing their faith or who were abused simply because they are female. I helped them tell their story through crafted casework submitted to agencies of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and to federal immigration court. This work was heartbreaking, and because of my own personal history growing up as an immigrant and minority in the racially hostile Deep South, the work was breaking me. Emotionally bankrupt from working in law, I naively thought I could escape these harsh entangled realities by pivoting my career into the “business world.”

Again, I could not have been more wrong.

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On that weekly check-in on March 1, 2022, I felt the seismic reverberation of the proverbial butterfly’s wing flap. Though the ensuing war in Ukraine could never be dismissed as a small event, my realized connection to the Russian invasion took new meaning: our project heavily relied on our outsourced partners based in Ukraine, and it too was at risk. Though our SI partner is headquartered in the United States, its main development hubs are in Eastern Europe and Latin America, with substantial staff situated across Ukraine’s largest cities. I recalled one of my business school professors drilling into my head that doing global business successfully meant understanding and mitigating risk against different cultural, political, and economic realities. The impact of the escalating Russo-Ukrainian War on our project could not have been overstated.

I had just turned 30 years old a few days prior. And I had thought I had figured out my strengths, how I perform, and what my values were (Drucker, 2005). I knew that I was an organized, task-oriented autodidact who enjoyed figuring out my own way through new challenges. I knew I learned by reading and other visual means, and proudly use closed captions on virtual meetings to ensure I catch everything discussed. I also knew that I wanted to impact and help people. This personal thesis has manifested in different ways throughout my pivots-laden career, and my values alignment with my current company Reckitt was undeniable. Reckitt’s mission is clear: “We exist to protect, heal and nurture in the relentless pursuit of a cleaner and healthier world” (Reckitt Benckiser Group plc, 2023). My current project, to re-platform the existing loyalty program for Schiff Vitamins in the United States, will facilitate our primary customers – everyday consumers – the ability to lead healthier lives. The

project would also accomplish key business objectives for various internal and external secondary customers, including enriched first-party data acquisition and leveraged efficiencies across marketing activities with our retail partners (Drucker, 2015).

We had an ambitious but realistic plan towards an April 1<sup>st</sup> launch. However, due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and unavailability of key developers on the SI team, we effectively halted work for all of March, completely abolishing any potential of meeting the original deadline.

However, wholly stopping the project was not an option. The Schiff business team had already notified their legacy loyalty technology provider that they were not renewing their contract past the termination date of March 31<sup>st</sup>. Any potential disruption to the loyalty program will frustrate consumers and diminish their confidence in our brands. The ripple effect of that reputation loss could be in the hundred-thousands to millions of dollars. The stakes were high: I had to figure out how to course-correct.

At the heart of our company's compass was "to do the right thing" (Reckitt Benckiser Group plc, 2023). This reminded me of one of Peter Drucker's most famous aphorisms that I learned in my first-year college internship: "Management is doing things right. Leadership is doing the right things." To do the right thing, I had to develop an action plan to mitigate the situation while being empathetic of the precarity of macro conditions that we could not control. I worked with Myra on the Schiff business team to enable a month-to-month service extension with the legacy loyalty technology vendor to ensure consumer-facing program continuity. I also requested additional in-house developers to be assigned to our project, to offset the resource losses on the SI side. These additional developers were allocated to our project by the top of April.

We made a lot of progress in April but not enough for a May launch. In addition to the escalated Russo-Ukrainian War that depleted our SI team's staff availability, we faced the more typical issues in technical implementations: under-scoped complex functionalities, competing branches of codes, and miscommunication between developer teams. Because the SI team had to hire more temporary staff while keeping affected staff on payroll, they also wanted their clients to pay more money for their continued engagement. However, the Schiff business team had no additional budget for this project. Whatever was available in their budget had already been allocated to the unforeseen costs of expensive month-to-month payments to the legacy loyalty technology vendor. There were no additional funds to pay the SI team nor the incoming loyalty technology vendor beyond the previously contracted amounts.

Every team on the project was losing money.

I created a chart to communicate the expected additional costs that each party was effectively paying due to the delays originating from the war in Ukraine. The business was paying monthly extension fees to the legacy loyalty technology provider. The incoming loyalty technology provider was also engaging additional staff to support the implementation and losing monthly licensing fees since it could not bill for those fees

until the program goes live on its technology. My department was paying for additional internal development support. And the SI team was paying for the additional development support it hired and the continued engagement of its staff.

I communicated to each group that no one benefitted from the project delays, and the only way forward was to collaborate more effectively. We worked together to descope some of the more complex functionalities so that we can get a minimal viable product (MVP) delivered in June with the balance to be delivered in latter phases. After all, “half a loaf is better than no bread” (Drucker, 2000, pg. 200).

The re-platformed Schiff Vitamins loyalty program launched in mid-June 2022 to commercial success. Because of its success, we were able to acquire additional funds to equitably pay the SI team and the new loyalty technology vendor for the project’s latter phases. Reckitt’s relationship with the SI team and the new loyalty technology provider were strengthened through this trial by fire. Moreover, Schiff Vitamins consumers benefited from a revamped loyalty program with more exciting rewards and benefits, and we were able to run promotions with retail partners through the new loyalty engine to great success for multiple internal teams.

## Part II

A year later, writing this essay amidst the background crooning of Mississippi native and American blues legend B.B. King, I marvel at how many details of the situation have escaped me. Because it was one of the most challenging times of my career where I had to balance my values, put (many different groups of) people first against difficult considerations, and make decisions and quickly execute, I may have repressed some of those memories. In reflecting on how I was able to lead this project to its completion, I think back to my childhood as an immigrant from urban Beijing to rural Mississippi. I remember how difficult it was to learn a new language, adapt to a new culture, adjust to a new world ecosystem as the minority of minorities. Growing up as the only Asian kid in most circumstances, I was ridiculed, ostracized, and even assaulted. I learned to grow up resilient like the state flowering tree, magnolia. Taking the lead from mentoring “steel magnolias” who set the standard for feminine fortitude, I became my own version of a “silk magnolia,” *stronger than steel*. In my twenties, I cast my raw, muddied lived experiences into the fire, transforming them into porcelain: academic explorations and artistic expressions concerning the trivialized inequities of the American South, the racialized Asian model minority paradox, and Asian female identity-making as “American.”

Earlier this year, I finally understood why telling my personal stories of resilience was integral to my healing process. I learned that this specific type of resilience built up through adversity is post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth is “positive change, including a recognition of personal strength, the exploration of new possibilities, improved relationships, a greater appreciation for life, and spiritual growth” that bloom after adverse events (Tedeschi, 2020). Though there are some who naturally find

themselves growing after trauma – a poignant example being Candace Lightner who founded the ubiquitous social sector organization Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) in 1980 after her teenage daughter was killed by a drunk driver – anyone can develop PTG through “education, emotional regulation, disclosure, narrative development, and service” (Tedeschi, 2020).

In the context of the Schiff Vitamins project of spring 2022, we developed growth during that onerous time through these five practices advocated for by Richard G. Tedeschi, a professor of psychology emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and co-author of the seminal work *Posttraumatic Growth*:

- Education: We educated ourselves on the new circumstances by acknowledging that we had to abandon the old project plan and reallocate resources against our changed conditions. We acknowledged that there were some factors, such as the war that we could not control, but we could make decisions to help our teams and partners.
- Emotional regulation: We managed our negative emotions by not being anxious or bitter ourselves and by allowing space for our Ukrainian partners to do what they needed to do. Sometimes that was folks taking time off to take care of themselves and their family. Sometimes it was conducting work, business as usual.
- Disclosure: We listened to everyone’s unique experiences during this time. For example, some folks had personal histories of war from other contexts. There was deep resonance and empathy for those directly impacted. In addition, I was able to get feedback and encouragement from my extracurricular millennial managers cohort on some of the management-related issues that arose during this experience.
- Service: Reckitt’s internal IT team is based in Warsaw, Poland, and some of them offered their homes to our Ukrainian partners. I liaised with senior management to add internal staffing to help offset the SI team’s work burden.
- Narrative development: Now, I am telling you (and maybe the world) this story and my reflective learnings.

At face value, my immigrating from Beijing to rural Mississippi and my re-platforming the Schiff Vitamins loyalty program have no relation to each other. But both circumstances served as opportunities for me to develop personal and professional strength in the face of adversity. I believe that, even in professional contexts, illuminating our common humanity is foundational to creating the space for people to achieve post-traumatic growth. Drucker believed that decision-making must happen at all levels of the organization and that each individual is the CEO of his/her own life (Drucker, 2000). Every management – and, as I would attest, personal – decision becomes an opportunity to let that common humanity shine through and to cultivate practices that enable humans to become resilient, grow, and overcome whatever obstacles that may stand in our way.

\*Individual names have been changed to protect privacy.

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