
"Five years."

I speak matter-of-factly. Why wouldn't I? In my between-proposals persona, I'm completely calm. Distracted a bit, maybe, as I peruse the menu on this downtown Edmonton patio while also wondering whether prolonged exposure to this unfamiliar sunshiny stuff will burn my nose.

When I look up, though, squinting, I get a surprise. Buddy's eyes are huge and he's looking nervously around the patio. What the heck? Did I miss something?

A few of us are out for lunch with a representative of a new and, therefore, unfamiliar teaming partner. I think we're supposed to be bonding. Without getting exactly, you know, familiar, we're supposed to get to know each other well enough that when the proposal-going gets tough, we can still work nicely together.

*Getting to know you
Getting to know all about you . . .
- Rodgers & Hammerstein*

Not that we'll be working directly with Buddy: he's a manager of some sort and their proposal team will report to him. Instead of making awkward small-talk he's been talking shop, telling us how his humungous company takes high-potential hires (*Yes, just like him a few years ago, turns out*) and starts them off in the corporate proposal shop. The idea is to give them a good overview of the company's business, while simultaneously getting the over-and-above effort needed to get proposals done.

The theory is that someone who's destined for the executive suite—or who wants to be—will work harder than your average schmo. Dress-for-success and work-to-impress, I guess.

But they leave them in place only for 18 to 24 months at most, the better to avoid burnout my dear. An interesting personnel-management model: Jump on, ride hard, and then dismount into a more-or-less regular job—older, smarter, and grateful for the change. He, for example, worked in the trenches for 14 months and then was promoted into his intended career stream: marketing management.

He asks how long I've been working on proposals. I answer absent-mindedly, thinking mostly about whether I can get extra salsa with my quesadilla. They never come with enough, you know?

"Five years."

He doesn't gasp. Not quite.

"FIVE YEARS?"

Ah. Now I think I understand the big eyes, the nervous glances: Buddy is afraid I'm going to explode in front of him. I mean, what are the odds that someone could do this work for that long and not fall apart?

*I . . . fall . . . to pieces
- Hank Cochran & Harlan Howard*

Pretty high, turns out.