

Jack's Right Fight

by Saj-nicole Joni and Damon Beyer

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When the head of a division had an impossible target to meet, the only way forward was through a constructive battle between allies.

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Jack Sparr called to order what was probably the most important meeting of his career. “Let’s get started,” he said. “You need to know what’s going on.” He paused for a moment and looked at his team. He was proud of them. But he had a challenge they would have to rise to. What was it President Kennedy had said about becoming a war hero? “It was unintentional; they sank my boat.” They would all have to be heroes now.

“Here’s the deal,” Jack began. “Franz needs something extraordinary out of us this coming year. The company’s under pressure to grow. A lot. And since we’re the best unit in the company, we need to grow the most. Profitably. Thirty percent.”

He held up his hand to stop the exclamations. Andre, Jack’s senior vice president of marketing, cut through the noise with his dry voice. “It’s not like we

haven’t been growing, Jack.” There were murmurs of agreement around the big conference table.

“I know,” said Jack. “This is our reward for doing so well. But we’ve got a tremendous opportunity with the portable unit. Not only to sell a lot of product and make our numbers. But to save lives. And that’s why we get up in the morning.”

He looked around the table again, and saw that he had everyone’s attention. “And that’s why I know you’re going to be able to do this. Despite the bad news.”

“Don’t tell me,” said Andre. “No budget increase to make the 30 percent, right? Or to launch a new product into new markets.”

“That’s about right. We’re getting some, but not as much as I wanted — or you wanted.” Jack put his hands on the table. “I’m still negotiating with Franz and the

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This article was adapted from Joni and Beyer's *The Right Fight: How Great Leaders Use Healthy Conflict to Drive Performance, Innovation, and Value* (Harper Business, 2010).

other divisions, but it's looking like you can count on 5 percent at most."

After the chorus of groans died down, he continued. "That means that we have to figure out how to make the new product launch work, and expand sales of the standard line, with essentially the same amount of money that we had last year."

Jack paused. "Andre, we aren't going to have the budget to do the big worldwide splash for the portable model that you were looking for. So from you, I need a Plan B to get us to 30 percent profitable growth despite that little limitation. And Danita." He turned to his senior vice president of sales. "I want the same thing from you. Give us your own separate plan to get to 30 percent, assuming flat funding. You're not going to have the money for a big reorg, but let's see some creativity." He paused again.

"You've both got two weeks. And don't give me anything halfhearted or provincial. Your plans need to look at all aspects of what the division can bring to the table to deliver these results. Work with each other, too. You know the drill. You don't get a Coke by putting four quarters in four machines. Think big."

Everyone around the table rolled their eyes at this one; they'd heard it many times from Jack, who had found much success in his career by making big, gutsy bets. But, thought Jack, they looked ready to try.

"I know this is tough," he said. "But you guys are the best there is. Two weeks from today. Same time, same place. Give it your best shot."

There was a brief silence. Then Danita spoke up. "We'd better get started, then," she said, with a light tone that fooled no one.

As he watched them go, Jack wondered how the

competition he had just set in motion would go between Danita and Andre. They were both tough, no-nonsense executives with a good team sense but also a keen sense of self-interest. They both were in line for his job, and the race between the two of them was fierce. He knew they would both take this opportunity as a way to show their stuff. That was in part why he had set them against each other. He just had to watch to make sure that it didn't get out of bounds. Jack was certain that the resulting plans would be better than anything either of them would produce without the competition, and he was as interested as they were in the results.

Staging the Right Fight

Alignment is overrated. If you are a leader who needs to innovate on a grand scale, change essential aspects of your organization, or meet an aggressive target, agreement is only half the answer. The path forward requires a healthy dose of dissent as well. Tension is universal, and the need to harness it productively is deeply human. You need to figure out how to fight the right fight.

A healthy debate has two qualities. First, it must be "right" in the choice of battlefield. Like the fight between Danita and Andre, it should link directly to core, material issues. These issues often involve the viability of the enterprise, or a purpose that goes beyond just hitting the numbers. Second, it must be "right" in the way it is conducted. As Jack Sparr tried to do for his division, someone must design and referee the fight, incorporating both robust competition and candid debate, to bring out the best in the people engaged in it.

Most leaders don't know how to create a right fight. They gravitate to ineffective battles out of habit, and they therefore reinforce all the dysfunctional, counter-

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productive aspects of their organization. Or they avoid fights altogether, gaining alignment on the surface but no real ethic of trust or common purpose, because people have never raised their conflicting views and beliefs in the open.

Fortunately, it’s easier than you may think to develop an ethic of constructive conflict in a company. And once you do, leadership can become far more effective.

The story of Jack Sparr is fiction based on an actual case, intended to demonstrate how the right fight can occur in corporate life. Although we’ve changed the names and circumstances to preserve confidentiality, the essentials of this story are true; they demonstrate the human side of what the right fight requires of people: to struggle, to lead, to have setbacks, and to win. Leading a right fight takes real leadership: head, heart, and guts.

Jack was already in a good position to stage the right fight. He had forged a great team. Danita and Andre especially had what it took to succeed — and they both knew it. But they kept their egos under control for the most part and worked well enough together, especially when Jack was in the room.

With more time and a bigger budget, achieving 30 percent sales growth would be easy enough for these two. But with such a tight time frame and such a limited budget, how would they get there? What were the key investments to make to get the jump in revenues? What was the right focus: existing products, the new portable model that looked so promising, rationalizing the sales organization, or reorganizing marketing?

If they pulled it off and met their target, Jack would be in the running to get the top job in the company. Moreover, the new portable unit had the potential to make a difference around the globe. The next few weeks

would be tough on all of them, but it would be worth it. They were fighting for a reason. Jack was determined that it would be a fair fight, and there would be something in it for everyone, no matter what the outcome. At the same time, he was looking for a winner — a clean choice, based on the merits.

Trapped by the Wrong Fight

Jack’s one-on-one meeting with Andre came the next day. About 10 minutes into it, Jack was scowling. Andre was having a crisis of confidence, complaining that Danita knew everyone and was likely to get more support for her plan, including the resources to work on it. Somehow, Danita was going to use her popularity to game the system and make it impossible for his approach to get a fair hearing.

“Andre,” Jack said, finally cutting him off, “this isn’t the way the game is played. If Danita tries to pull a fast one, don’t you think I’d notice? I agree, Danita is a hell of a presenter, but that doesn’t make her anything but talented. Life isn’t fair. But your work will get a fair shake. It’s your job to see that your true brilliance, something we have relied on for a long time, is out there in full force. And please don’t present one of your infamous PowerPoint decks and put us all to sleep.”

He got up to show that it was time to go. “You’ve got two weeks,” Jack said as he left Andre’s office. “Make the most of it.”

Jack spent much of the next 13 days putting out little political fires started by Andre and Danita. Andre had started rumors about the sales division and how it was not meeting targets. How then, he argued, could it meet any new, higher ones? Danita didn’t complain openly about Andre, but she didn’t have to; it was clear

that she regarded him as a lightweight. Meanwhile, she used all the force of her personality, and whatever favors she could call in, to get people to contribute to her presentation and back her approach.

These tricks presented Andre and Danita in a new light, Jack found. The two SVPs had, in fact, fallen prey to the kinds of traps that create wrong fights. Their covert maneuvers drained organizational energy, distracted people from both long-term goals and day-to-day operations, and disappointed everyone around them. Jack didn't see much he could do about it. He thought they could both use feedback and coaching, but the stakes were so high he didn't want anyone feeling railroaded by him. And time was running out. The day of the meeting came all too soon: It was time to conduct the presentations, get the two ideas out on the table, and make an executive decision.

"Danita," said Jack, smiling, "You're first. Go ahead. Knock it out of the park."

Danita began by arguing that the main effort should focus on the sales force, reorganizing salespeople regionally. She had conducted some research that showed that the base business, if focused that way, would take a huge leap. After all, the base business had much better margins than the portable units.

She proposed using the profits from the first year to build up the portable model's major expansion in Year Two. She would need big resources quickly to pull off the restructuring, add a few high-priced top people, and put up a website for the sales force to help them with the eventual rollout of the portable unit. It wouldn't completely gut the marketing budget, but she was going to need a big piece of it.

Andre's plan headed in an entirely different direc-

tion. He had hired a topnotch consultant with wide expertise in marketing. The consultant had come back with a market segmentation plan that could hit the numbers. And the plan was a good one. The basic insight was to goose up the base business a little, but to take most of the money and roll out the new portable model in small businesses, local organizations, and schools. Their plan would also take on a piece of the consumer market in a big way for the first time.

Tension built slowly through the meeting, but something in Jack's gut told him that wasn't a bad thing. The choice lay with him. And the team knew it; some people were clearly watching him, trying to guess what he would decide. It was obvious that both Danita and Andre had their own agendas, and everyone understood that. Everyone also wanted the whole team to succeed — so that it wouldn't be the end of the world for the loser. And they hoped Jack would make sure that the losing team would not go away empty-handed.

Jack smiled to himself. His HR guy had suggested an off-site meeting with team-building exercises to help relieve the tension. But Jack thought this way was better, because they were aiming for something really significant. A little tension along the way was a small price to pay for a better strategy in the end.

"Thanks, Danita," Jack concluded. "Thanks, Andre. That was fabulous. You've given us all a lot to think about, and I'm sure we'll have lots to discuss this afternoon. Shall we all reconvene at one o'clock?" He looked around the room, seeing nods and agreement; he nodded back, picked up his BlackBerry and his pile of papers, and headed back to his office. He needed time to figure out what he thought about the two ideas. Where was the big bet that would make the numbers

and involve both sales and marketing?

As good as Danita's presentation was, it didn't feel completely solid. It didn't make enough of the new machine. He knew the new product was going to be big, and her plan built it up too slowly. If they waited until Year Two, a competitor might get the jump on them. But Andre's plan was just the opposite — it would work in theory, but it relied too much on the portable machine. And Jack was nervous about pushing the sales force into the middle market and consumer arenas, where they didn't have much experience. They had always been focused on the larger business-to-business world.

Everything in Jack's experience told him that a big bet was essential. They couldn't bet half the farm on each plan. That wouldn't get them anywhere.

Jack sighed. No matter if the team screamed for a decision. They would have to wait a little longer. The stakes were high, and he had to get the decision right. In the meantime, he would have to keep an eye on both Danita and Andre to make sure, once again, that no one stepped out of line.

In the Corner Office

Another very tense week went by. Halfway through it, Jack went to see Franz, the CEO, to reassure him that his team was fine, despite any rumbles that might be heard around the building. He planned to announce that he was going with Danita's plan.

But when he got to the corner office, something told him to hold back.

"There's a lot riding on this," Jack said to Franz. "I've got one shot, and I want to get it right. That's why I've started this little competition between the two of them. They're good executives. They can handle it. And I'm going to wrap it up soon, so the agony will be over."

"What about the fallout?" wondered Franz. "What are you going to do about the loser?"

"We can make them whole," Jack said. "There will be plenty of glory to go around."

Franz looked at him. "You sound confident."

"I am," said Jack. "This is going to work. I need until the end of the week to make the decision."

"I'm looking forward to it," said Franz.

That night, trying to fall asleep, Jack was still debating with himself. What's wrong with me? he wondered. Do I need to think in some new way? But, he thought, big bets have always worked for me. There has to be some bet that pays off this time, too.

Suddenly Jack sat up in bed. He pounded the pillow. "That's it!"

The next morning, he put in a call to Sascha, a friend who had been an informal mentor to him throughout his career. As he talked through the problem with her, Sascha encouraged him to trust his instincts. "You're in a truly complex situation here," she said, "but I think you've got an opportunity to get what's best out of both plans — the markets, margins, and timing sensitivities require it. Give the challenge back to the team. They're good, regardless of the politics. They'll come through for you."

When Jack hung up, he sat staring at the wall, lost in thought, until it was time for a meeting that Andre had requested.

Jack knew from his back channels that most members of the team were betting that Danita's plan would win; he also knew that Andre was worried. It was time to astonish them both and get them to work out a whole new approach — not a compromise, but something that took into account the complexity of regions, markets, and segments. They needed to come together on the best of both, without the dreaded "half of each."

As he waited for Andre to come to his office, he felt tired, yet deeply excited at the same time. He was thinking about big bets differently than he ever had before.

And he was smiling when Andre walked into his office, saying, "Thanks for seeing me." Five minutes later, Jack was no longer smiling. Andre had delivered an earful. And Jack didn't like what he had heard.

It began with a long, involved story about the design group. They had come up with beautiful packaging for the portable model, but the supply chain folks were pointing out that it was too expensive. They were suggesting an alternative plastic housing that wouldn't support the colors in the gorgeous design. Andre wound up the story by looking at him expectantly. But Jack wasn't going to intervene on his behalf. This was a wrong fight, and Jack knew it right away.

Andre was a brilliant creative force, but he was ornery — and here he was making another grab for power. He could be brilliant but wrong, and Jack was going to have to make that clear to him — again.

Andre then jumped into an attack on Danita's proposal; he questioned her team's ability to handle the retraining that would be necessary. Making this argument was dirty pool, and Jack could see it from a mile away, but he heard Andre out because he would need everyone to be a team player when Jack put forward his

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new approach that afternoon. Everyone was going to have to grow — especially Andre, thought Jack.

So Jack merely said that it would be time to worry about the training when the plan was set. As he left, he said to himself that it was time to change the shape of the fight.

The Fulcrum of the Fight

“What will move the top line and get us to 30 percent growth?” Jack looked at his team, including Danita and Andre. “I’ve really been struggling with your ideas on this. Both of your plans make big bets. You gave me what I asked for. But neither plan is going to work the way we want it to.”

Jack paused. “So I’m going to surprise you. This issue is more complex than we originally thought. Your approaches both have brilliant aspects, and we need both — not half of each. There is a way to get to 30 percent, but it’s going to involve the two of you working together, with your teams, to come up with a new plan that does both: reorganizes the geography and bets on the portable model. With a sensitivity to timing and local realities, and a new look at segmentation, I know it will work. We need to weave these plans together and not expect one global approach all at the same time. It *has* to work. It has the potential to save a lot of lives, and our company is counting on us. So I’m going to ask you both, once again, to come up with a plan: but this time a joint one.”

He looked at Danita and Andre and their teams. Everyone had been poised for a winner and a loser. Now both teams were silent, looking at each other. And then, to Jack’s surprise, Andre spoke first.

“Danita,” he said, “I’ve been putting marketing first

because I really believed it was the way to go, and I haven’t been entirely open with you. But Jack’s just asked us to do something that’s important. I don’t fully understand it yet, but if Jack is willing to think beyond what’s worked for him before, I am, too. And I can feel this will fly. Of course it will save lives, and it could be really big for us. That’s why I got into this business, and I know you care about it, too. What do you say? Can we work together on this?”

Danita looked at him in silence for a long minute. Finally she said, “Welcome back, Andre. I was hoping the genius marketer I know and love would get back in town. Let’s get to work.”

Jack realized he had been holding his breath. He let it out. “Danita, your plan makes sense,” he said, “because we need to roll out the new machine in stages. You’re right that the standard models get us the margins we need at first to keep this ball rolling. And that we should do much more with existing models, especially in certain regions. But Andre’s right, too — we’ve got to bet on the new machine, and bet big, or there will be no tomorrow.”

He looked around the table. “We’re going to do both plans. We’re just going to intertwine them and implement them gradually. What this means is that we won’t have one easy answer, like a formula, for how we decide priorities. We’ll have to work this out every step of the way — encouraging different views and sorting out competing ideas as things emerge and we learn more. This will take the combined focus and attention of the three of us, and I’m committed to giving this as much of my time and attention as it needs. This is still a big bet, but it’s the best of both worlds.”

Jack sat back and waited, as both teams considered

the implications of what he had just said. Then Danita spoke. “I’m ready to get to work. Andre, you’ll have my input on which geographies to tackle first by tomorrow. We can set up a rolling training program that will take us around the world. What do you say?”

After a moment, Andre slowly nodded his head. “Let’s get started,” he said.

“Great,” said Jack. “Let’s see the new plan on my desk in three days.”

The Right Ending

Over the next few months, the two teams got going on the new direction. Danita and Andre continued to disagree on details. But working closely with Jack and the other members of their teams, they solved the problems, one by one.

The two SVPs found they enjoyed working together and were able to quickly heal the open disruption of the previous weeks. The tension between them was now jocular, creative, and energetic; it drew in people from operations, logistics, and distribution as well.

The double-stranded plan and ensuing rollouts were an extraordinary success, and the team went on to make a larger bet on the portable machine in Year Two. Jack and his team delivered the numbers.

After the second year, Jack was promoted to group president, overseeing multiple divisions. There were three group presidents, and Jack was clearly in the running to take over when Franz retired. Danita moved up to head the division, taking Jack’s old job, while Andre traveled with Jack to become group SVP of marketing.

More right fights would take place in this company, generally over how to fulfill other seemingly impossible goals. Sometimes, as with this fight, the solution would

embody multiple points of view. Sometimes there were clear winners and losers. But the understanding was now ingrained in the enterprise: Only by laying out their disagreements openly, and focusing the fights on principles instead of politics, could people create an ending in which everyone won something. +

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Resources

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Saj-nicole Joni, *The Third Opinion: How Successful Leaders Use Outside Insight to Create Superior Results* (Portfolio, 2004): To navigate the complexity of right fights, you need a strong inner circle and advisors who will tell you the unvarnished truth.

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12 Angry Men. Directed by Sidney Lumet. MGM, 1957: Classic film about a fight worth fighting.

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