Eradicating defects

I sit opposite a man whose eyes narrow into slits as I speak. Am I not convincing enough? Is he questioning my answers?
I need this job. I can't afford rejection. The government's financial support is temporary—before the current term ends, I'll have to be hired again, at least for the minimum hours needed to keep the funding alive. But I mustn't show how desperate I am. That's what my application adviser told me: turn the pressure into something positive about the organisation. Slip into the mainstream. Get in. It barely felt like regular language, but I understood the trick. It wasn't "I need a job." It was "What an honour to be allowed to work here!"

Yet something's wrong. There's a crack in the careful mask I've built. The worst part is that I don't actually believe what I'm saying. If you analysed my answers coldly you could argue I'm contradicting myself. But it doesn't feel like that. Only my feelings give me away.

Another question comes—unexpected, from a different angle. The personnel officer, who has been quietly listening to the General Manager's questions and my replies, makes a small sound.

"And in a crisis?" the General Manager asks. "When there's no one to consult, and even hesitation might take too long, do you choose the solution that suits the moment, or do you fall back on traditional options, however poorly they seem to fit?"

Instantly I see the company profile: something like the Committee on Standards in Public Life —thorough, safe, unshakable. He's trying to trip me up with "however poorly they fit", but he slips by with a tell: the little word "seem". As if the mismatch is merely apparent.

I smile and take my time. "Look," I say. "I'm not some young fool, and I don't dress or look like one either. Choosing creativity can be wonderful and sometimes helps society. But it simply doesn't work in a crisis. Traditional choices are designed to get things right in 98 cases out of 100. And just as importantly, they're defensible and easy to sell, even to the

press. Someone can always claim they were in one of the two exceptional situations, and that they had to make the call. That undermines the whole principle behind standard handling."

The General Manager nods, then hands me another compliment. "You come across as analytical. It shows in your tests and your CV. And you can operate in a team."

I can't imagine what a "team" means in a place like this. Is he setting a trap? Is it about time-orientation—about feelings—about drive to perform? The last one, definitely. He adds, as if he's helping me: "You'll need to be able to inspire a team to achieve great performance." The tone in "inspire" sets alarm bells ringing. They're here to reject anything that looks like initiative.

"I think teamwork is something else entirely," I say, "not just a collection of people grouped around an inspiring leader. It's about carrying out the fixed corporate procedures in the context of the environment."

What a mess of words. It sounds like my adviser again—two years of training, apparently, not properly washed out of me.

My answer lands well: ingenuity within limits, with no trace of a frustrating personal viewpoint. They start to accept me. I decide to look interested and let it show that I know the company.

"The staff turnover has been—"

"High, of course!" the personnel officer interrupts. "We're not ashamed of it, but it's important to understand how that figure is calculated."

Even before I ask, the personnel officer jumps up, like this is something they've been struggling with.

"An annual figure doesn't tell you how long people actually worked," they explain. "Of that 18% turnover, 16% is explained by new employees failing probation. Probation lasts the usual two months. But we don't leave people idle. We throw them into real crises and watch how they

respond."

My eyes wandered across the room. Grey suits, grey talk – I'm losing interest. There's nothing I can do about it: it simply happens. The walls aren't solid; they look cheap, worn out, detached. The style is absent—dull, uniform, boring.

What strikes me is the huge demands the company makes, but the place doesn't have the aura you'd expect to justify them. Or maybe it does, in a way: it feels like they expect a workforce of zombies—mouthless, mindless labour that exists to extend the top management.

Posters line the walls: clocks. I can't believe it. In a setting like this I'd expect something else. I realise the correct term is probably "correction facility"—but to me it still feels like an asylum.

Clocks, pendulums, alarm radios, wristwatches—timekeeping machines as propaganda. Only in the staff canteen something different is displayed. And then it hits me: the small circle at the lower part of their ties is another cursed clock. I breathe in and ask whether the tie counts as part of the company uniform. The General Manager gives a small, mean smile.

"No. To get that, you have to reach a certain level. Don't misunderstand me. As a staff member you naturally function at a certain level—but I mean more like having earned his tracks."

The building itself is filthy, poorly maintained, covered in the remains of smoke. It's exactly what I'd expect from a state-adjacent organisation that won't be discussed. A useful organisation in our time-obsessed society, yet nobody wants to know. Earlier, the executioner wasn't really a hero, and the wardens weren't exactly popular either. A "corrective institution for the eradication of defects in timekeeping"—how far did something like that go? Were atomic clocks that drifted by a nanosecond per century kept here as well?

The last thing I wanted was more word-salad from the grey suits, jammed in between government paint and clock posters.

With the year without coffee sitting at the back of my mind, and the prospect of funding that would soon run out, I managed to push my motivation back into the foreground—so strongly that these self-satisfied creatures must have been able to smell it. I was in. Weren't they supposed to be whispering to each other in the corridor anyway? No—handshakes, encouraging words. The probation period would start the very next day.

As if they've agreed it, an employee rushes in mid-conversation, looking flustered. Neatly dressed, yet it doesn't help. "Can I talk to you?" he stammers. "There's a crisis!" Apparently the General Manager has to handle it, and I almost stand—only to be waved down.

"A crisis to be a crisis," he says, "a lot has to happen."

The employee trips over the details: "Another one being pushy. Some inheritance, some old emotion. He wanted his clock back immediately. It wasn't about functionality; it was the dial that had to stay. Became angry, grabbed a brick, and threw it at three alarm clocks in the observation room."

For me it's nonsense, but not for the General Manager..

"This is our trainee, Nolte," he announces, as if that explains everything. "Nolte, this is the newly hired policy officer—Storage and Relocation Issues —Heartfelt." He tells Nolte, "You've got a sense for timing."

Nolte laughs nervously. "Timing, yes… as you say."

The General Manager wants the story repeated clearly and coherently. Then he tells the officer, "And Alex —just so you know: clocks in the observation rooms don't have a final status, so they can't formally be classed as alarm clocks. They can look like alarm clocks, of course, but that's irrelevant. Clear?"

"Certainly, Mr Fields," the officer replies. "It was more of a shortcut, given the issue. Well, this must have been a visit by somebody not able to cope,

I imagine. Of course a replacement timepiece was provided under government procedure, along with the receipt. This was clearly a matter of principle. Government dictatorship."

"So there's no political objection to the procedure," the General Manager concludes.

I keep silent. I can imagine someone refusing to swallow it when an inherited item with emotional value is removed for reasons that have nothing to do with it. However, refusing to remove the hands is also rigid — because without hands, a clock can't be treated as a clock. It becomes style, ornament, decoration. It could be confusing if a broken timepiece *with* hands was standing in a room. The emotional value was hardly touched by the removal whilst the risk of a mistake was reduced to zero.

"… he threw a brick at one of the shelves. Three defective timepieces for classification. At any rate, the glass ones."

"Arrange for them to be repaired straight away. Bring the paperwork back later for a signature."

Now I was genuinely surprised. From the detailed documentation I'd understood that the correction institution did everything except repair. I wanted to know more and decided to ask how it all worked. Nolte had already run off—presumably to fill out a form.

"First of all, something outside your question, Mr Heartfelt. Don't you think we'll dismiss Mr Nolte immediately for his sloppy reporting? And not only for that—also for his lack of understanding of the status differences between classified and unclassified timepieces, and for his lack of independence. He could have come here with a form and a short, clear report on what had happened.

"But first, he's a warehouse employee. From you we naturally expect rather more insight. And besides, he's only just started. During the probation period, people get multiple chances. If it continues like this, we'll have to think again."

“Now to your question—yes. It’s a misunderstanding to think we simply leave everything to chance here. Damage to lacquer, glass, ornaments, and so on, is repaired competently. We have six restorers working around for exactly these matters…”

“And not a single watchmaker or clockmaker?”

“None at all, correct. That’s the foundation of our philosophy. Following the government’s policy—that’s a political choice.”

As long as I had work to do, I thought it was best to leave it there. I stayed quiet.

The next morning they put me in a meeting room that looks no better than the interview room. I have to network and profile my way through it: manage relationships, perform optimism, show adaptability. The atmosphere is cautious and stingy. Leaving out the sugar from your coffee could mark you out as volunteering for heroism—although it’s close enough to sympathy for resistance. Everything is almost political, just expressed in Human Resources language.

There’s talk about the number of incoming and outgoing timepieces, litres of oil for the dipping procedure, insurance costs, headcount fluctuations. The Management Team reads the figures out loud. There are no graphs. No overhead slides either. Colour, I suspect, is forbidden.

My neighbour seems to read my thoughts. “The overhead projector’s burnt out,” she says. “We read everything out for now.” Good. At least at this level they’re functioning. Colour is allowed after all. Just bad luck with my timing.

Then a powerful voice cuts in. “Mr Chairman! I believe I’ve found a solution to the structural budget overruns in recent months. As the responsible person for the pre-assessment stage, I can tell you that one of our employees in ‘Classification’ has reached the age eligible for early retirement.”

He pauses for effect.

“I want to propose we don’t refill the post… but…”

He waits again.

“Of course it can’t be done automatically. If we interpret the Law on Margins in Time Indication strictly, there’s dependence on the type of timepiece—but that dependence hasn’t been quantified.”

Another interruption: “There’s a table in the circular—margins in absolute units.”

“Yes,” the speaker says, steering the meeting back, “and that circular from three years ago defines one hundred and seventeen classes. Each class has three to five subclasses. The total comes to four hundred ninety eight subclasses. As you know, the main grouping is done by junior classifiers, and sub-classification by more expensive and older senior classifiers. We were advised by the Berkly commission to set up seven hundred and twelve classes. Meticulous work—but no one forces us to do it.”

He looks about.

“And special cases aren’t measured three times—they undergo four margin measurements. I’m looking at my colleague Peat from Margin Analysis. You can see where I’m going. One employee from my side—and perhaps the same for that colleague too…”

A huge murmur erupts. Numbers roll across the table like marbles. Sheets and notebooks change hands as if they were rare stamps. Peace never comes back. The meeting dissolves neatly into coffee break.

By afternoon I meet the warehouse chief. That feels odd, because I thought I’d spoken to him already. It turns out there are two warehouses: the goods warehouse and the object warehouse. The object warehouse has higher status. It’s where the main process happens: where defective timepieces are stored until they’re returned to society.

“Do you do anything with them?” I ask, although I know it’s a stupid question. I already know it’s absolutely forbidden to do anything to the timepieces except cosmetic restoration. Like what I saw the day before.

The warehouse chief answers anyway, with an unexpected twist.

“Not in itself,” he says. “But we have thirty-five diploma-holding timepiece restorers working here. The average citizen calls them ‘clockmakers’. Under a work-guarantee scheme, they’re allowed to practise their trade.”

“So repairs are done?” I ask.

“Absolutely not,” he says.

“The idea’s there,” he continues, “but only oil baths. That requires knowledge.”

“Isn’t it frustrating?”

“Staying at home would be far worse. Here they’re in contact with timepieces. Besides, they remove the movement before dipping. That’s what they’re good at.”

I press further.

“Dipping—only for mechanical clocks? How about the digital ones?”

“You mean electrical and electronic, quartz-controlled, satellite-controlled, and similar?”

I was just thinking about devices without cogwheels, nothing more.

I try to ask about the “correction facility” and how it fits in. The chief rejects the term.

“An incorrect word. We’re here for observation and removal.”

“But I thought the formal name…”

From an outdated brochure, most likely. Last year the board of directors has set a new strategy and with that came the new name.

Then he explains the direction in plain political language: funding is being withdrawn for research into intensive stimulation of electronic and electrical timepieces—an immediate response to a perceived need. They’re clearly not repairing the old system. They’re hunting for a future excuse. I was driven mad by this man—but he seemed to be driven mad by me as well, apparently. It was all rather strange. A warehouse chief in a three-piece anthracite-coloured suit, with an affected way of speaking.

“Much to my regret, I have to be elsewhere—urgently.”

He didn’t sound sorry at all. And neither did I. Especially considering that I was going to have to sort out his overflowing object-warehouse problems.

We live in a society obsessed with time. The removal law is just a symptom. With clocks everywhere—rooms, street corners, wrists, computers—confusion about the correct time should be impossible. Yet under law, any timepiece with unacceptable inaccuracy is seised for a period. A constitutional referee assesses severity based on expert measurement reports. (Constitutional! Where in the constitution time was mentioned? Or did they change it recently?) The country also has plenty of case law—especially around the hands-removal trick: without hands, a timepiece isn’t a “timepiece” any more; it becomes style, ornament, or decoration.

Some call it mutilation.

The penalty for unacceptable inaccuracy is “removal”. And interestingly, the owner isn’t punished—the clock is removed because of social dysfunction. The severity of the deviation determines how long it’s removed for.

First it’s assessed in the object warehouse. If there’s a deviation, the

timepiece is classified. Then the class and subclass margins are set. An advisory report is sent to the constitutional referee, including the average and standard deviation. After removal is confirmed, the timepiece stays in storage for the appointed period, getting stiff with dust. Sometimes it's dipped in oil to improve things—though because of the growing number of objects, that doesn't happen often.

Even the oil is a problem: the purchasing department buys a cheaper type —3,000 gallons—which the skilled workers say turns sticky after a few years. So the timepieces emerge worse than before.

The watchmakers were never heard. Whether anything goes right or wrong doesn't matter. Everybody walking past the building would say it's a complete waste of money, yet thousands of people were employed here. What matters is political necessity.

From inside, I think, employees must see it as an elaborate joke. Yet since I've started working it won't drift far from me. Still, I find myself thinking: I could propose something. Despite all the politics, one would feel the need for a more lean and efficient way of working.

The next day I walk through the object warehouse, wandering. I pick up clocks here and there. Some are open, full of dust. I blow between the gears and then wipe my hands with my handkerchief. At the same moment I hear a buzzing sound.

A camera is turning towards me from above. Automatically? Or is someone watching a control panel, suspicious of every move I make?

Then it becomes clear: not a "he", but a "she" behind the panel. And she trusts me—only she's afraid I'll be tempted to "make it right", using a pocketknife or a key to get it working again. "Especially men," she adds. "It's very strange."

I don't find it strange at all. With small boys, those actions lead to repairs in half the cases. In the other half, the timepiece is destroyed and they would tell there's nothing more that can be done—or that it was an old

wreck anyway. Sometimes those boys would become doctors.

But this woman is different. Or at least she treats me differently. We go for a drink in a staff bar called Time-out. What's in a name! I picture a character from Evelyn Waugh, devoted to her work. This one is attached, but not intoxicated with the universal "usefulness" of the entire removal system.

Still no romance, no marriage, no children playing with clock-removal devices. It's a short story, after all, and it has to end somewhere.

She turns out—somehow—to be connected to management or personnel. The high personnel turnover is treated as desirable: harshly criticised in politics and parliament, yet kept anyway. Why? Probably because it's the only way to put people to work for a fixed period at the "right" level. After that short term, they return to qualify again for government funding. The word "allowance" had been removed from official language years ago. By the way, this isn't an official lecture on how things really work. It's my reconstruction of what society does.

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Soon after I was thrown out. Why? She gave a draft of my policy memo to one of the directors. That memo ended me. Thinking it through now, it might have been her attempt to be kind. Maybe she really liked the piece and wanted to help me. I assumed she twisted the story when it all went wrong, but it could be she wasn't spying after all. Just that her good intentions caused a disastrous misunderstanding.

What did my memo say? I realise, with a flush of embarrassment, that my proposal was foolish. It suggested that mechanical timepieces could be cleaned with compressed air before the oil bath. In about 10% of cases that would reduce deviations to within the allowed margin. Then, after reassessment, the timepiece might no longer need to be removed.

It would reduce occupancy in the object warehouses by about 7%—not 10%, because some "friction removal" would still have to happen.

It sounded like dry, rational bookkeeping. But even that calculation exposed the deeper conflict: there's a rule—something like "Section 14 lid four", stating that the essence of the timepiece must never be interfered with. Cleaning with compressed air counts as interference. My dismissal was immediate, with no right of appeal.

The interesting thing about the whole business is how quickly I got pulled into politics. No more being judged by peculiar people in dark grey suits. Now it's hard confrontation—something I can handle.

Within politics, I develop expertise in timepiece removal. I write a memo about how to interpret that infamous line about not interfering with the essence. It turns out compressed-air cleaning is allowed—and must be allowed.

Recently, the General Manager was almost fired for negligence and inefficient management. He saved himself using an old policy memo: mine! The policy change created a problem: there's now space in the warehouse. We found a workaround. Tomorrow I will set up a steering group called "snitch lines"—free phone numbers for reporting. And the standards for Swatches are tightened by 2%.

Of course the empty space in the object warehouse will be filled again. Politics suits me better than administration ever did.