WeGet letters

by Michael W Lucas

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> Oh, bloviating BSD-er,
>
> I work for a wonderful small company with smart, kind leaders that let the IT group do its job. We've built all our infrastructure according to carefully designed plans that scale to meet our needs. Our network is meticulously segmented to isolate risky services from vital data, our servers are automatically patched, and we spend most of our time smoothing our tiny kinks. I just learned that we're being bought by a multinational corporation that's constantly in the news for security breaches and often mentioned as a place where competent people used to work. Is there any way that we can save what we've built?
>
> —Worried and Raging

Dear WAR,

    While "no" is sufficient answer to your question, the Journal editors insist that I respond in more depth so that they're not left with blank pages. I don't understand why they don't simply cover that space with advertising, especially as I was not officially informed that the sales department is on a week-long gelato cruise that I was not invited to, but I suppose amateurs and hobbyists have a right to develop their meager skills without my presence highlighting their inferiority. (The trick is to eat through the dairy coma until your pancreas transcurses its fleshly limits and understanding that water breaks are not only for cleansing the palate. If your undisciplined palate can still differentiate flavors after the day's third hogshead, that is.)

    Your problem distills to finances. Once you involve business, everything distills to finances. Those cozy leaders you worked for? Their kindness was either a ploy or weakness. Building a small company into something profitable enough to sell for a small fortune means attracting skilled people, and kindness is the bait—especially when businesses define "kindness" as "torture them less." If they're honestly kind, well, that's pure weakness and financiers can sniff out weakness like trash pandas honing in on yesterday's tuna salad, with similar results. Sure, the new owners might talk about "good will" and promise that nobody will lose their job but that job is already lost, transparently replaced by some churning monstrosity that constricts an inch every day. Take a deep breath now. That air has to last you the rest of this job.

The real problem is that you care about your work. Designing and deploying systems that work well proves you care, when a thick layer of impact-absorbent apathy solves most problems encountered at work. If you must care, though, the easy solution is to ignore directives coming from the new owners. If they're incompetent, they won't notice. Maybe they tell you to install a few servers running infamously insecure operating systems. Your network is well-segmented, so put them somewhere that the inevitable breaches will have no impact on the important work. Maintain and use your existing services until the new owners can provide equivalent replacements, which will arrive on Saint Never's Day.

This presumes that something in your infrastructure is worth saving. —Is it?

Perhaps you have extensive monitoring and log analysis, all meticulously tuned to inform you of every little wobble. You can identify the host spewing stray packets with a single netflow query and know how many times a second a hopeful spambot flings garbage at xmlrpc.php. Your mail server sneers at spam. You've even taught fail2ban manners *without* resorting to a spiked club. You have all this, right? Or do you merely have plans for all these? Plans offer the greatest gift, which is Hope, but hope and a good swift kick to the teeth will get you a minuscule stash of legal narcotics and a substantial dentist bill. Are you protecting the dream or the reality? Dreams can be moved. Whatever you're planning to do can be planned just as well elsewhere, and always remember Rule of System Administration #15: *Today's plans address yesterday's failures*. Failure is a renewable resource, granting you endless opportunity to brew new plans.

Or perhaps the new owners are one of those giant tech firms whose major product is buyouts. They have a team dedicated to managing vermin like you. The day the buyout is announced two tech goons arrive—special goons chosen for their innate ability to ignore your worth, wearing camouflaging Unix conference T-shirts and conversant with the language of competence but carrying a Windows server and a router with the console port pins snipped off for the corporate dark fiber being installed tomorrow. They might even buy pizza as a gesture of friendship and cooperation. Eat the pizza and show your teeth. The goons will mistake it for a smile.

Hope might be the greatest of gifts, but it is also the most treacherous. The company's new owners will let you hope things will stay the same. When everything shifts, they'll let you hope for improvement, relying on your hope to keep you in place as they extract everything worthwhile from their new asset. Buyouts, like blackmail, work on hope. Logic declares that the only possible end of a rousing game of blackmail is the death of a participant and that if you didn't start the game, your first move is choosing between victory and victimhood—again, like buyouts.

Steel your soul, and immediately contact everyone who owes you a favor. You need a new employer before those goons return with wire cutters to snip the power cables on all your existing servers.

> **Designing and deploying systems that work well proves you care.**

The good news is that predatory financiers can buy your company, but they can't buy the things that make your company profitable. They have the company contracts, but they don't have the relationships and expertise that made you successful. When you overcome that hideous hope and depart for a firm that sucks less, you take that with you.

And that's what you save. The connections with your coworkers and customers. What's in your head. Configuring that perfect computing environment will go much more quickly next time, except it won't be perfectly adapted to your new employer and you'll need fresh plans.

This time, you might even implement them. Probably not. But you'll hope, and that's a gift.

Have a question for Michael?
Send it to letters@freebsdjournal.org

MICHAEL W LUCAS is the author of a bunch of BSD-related books and articles. After years of requests, he finally put up a complete bibliography at https://mwl.io so that people have a better chance of avoiding his work. He also owes the esteemed Terry Pratchett a sincere and heartfelt apology.