



SIR RICHARD BRANSON AND JEAN OELWANG: HUMOR AND JOY

I always try to make sure everyone keeps their sense of humor through it all. (Our flights have) provided plenty of opportunities for that. I've made it a habit to hide inside the overhead luggage holds, encouraging the crew to do likewise. When guests board and open the holds, we greet them with a friendly, "Good morning, sir. Can I take your bag?"

- Sir Richard Branson¹

Joy and humor speed up the process to trust and respect. They create a safe space to grow a relationship.

- Jean Oelwang²

Imagine the following – you are hanging upside down from a bungee cord, towed by a helicopter hundreds of feet above the azure blue water of Sydney harbor, seconds away from careening face first into the Darling Harbor Bridge.

For acrophobic readers, the prior tableau may resemble your worst nightmare. To others, it sounds like a scene in a late 90s action film in which you, mild-mannered reader, would avert your eyes from the screen, instead preferring to wait for the folly-induced *splat* to verify impact

If you possess similar cinematic sensibilities to the author of this caselet, you are most likely wondering, 'You totally ripped that scene from a Steven Seagal film, yes? Under Siege? Under Siege 2? 3?!'

For Richard Branson, it was just another Tuesday.

¹ Branson, Richard, *Finding My Virginity*, p. 100, Penguin Random House, 2017.

² Interview with Virgin Unite CEO Jean Oelwang, February 11, 2018. All subsequent quotations are from this interview unless otherwise noted.

Jeffrey Conn (MS 2018), Lecturer Naomi Bagdonas (MBA 2015), Professor Jennifer Aaker, Jean Oelwang and Greg Rose prepared this case as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

It was November 2000, and Branson and his team were kicking off Virgin Mobile's Australian cellular phone service launch. The plan was thus: Branson drifts above the harbor side, floats down to a cage and frees dozens of customers trapped in steel cages from the metaphorical bondage of their existing cellular plans.

But alas, there was a hitch in the plan – the Virgin team could not find any brave insurance agent who would dare to take on the risk of insuring Branson's life during the stunt. No matter the cost.

The task of breaking this news to Branson fell on recently hired Chief Marketing Officer Jean Oelwang. In her first face-to-face meeting with the new boss. Oelwang gathered her courage to inform Richard of the bad news.

Upon hearing, Branson sat stone-faced at his desk. Finally, he sighed: "We can't do it."

Oelwang's face grew white – this response was to be expected. Her thoughts turned to the next set of action steps which needed to be taken to unravel the months of planning preceding this moment: informing the press, canceling the helicopter, nixing the caterer, preparing resignation letters... Wait a second... was the boss smiling?

Branson let out a gleeful cackle and slapped his knee, bellowing, insurance be damned, "***Oh please! Of course I'm still going to do it!***"

Mini-Epilogue

Though Branson narrowly avoided being squashed like an insect against the side of the bridge (he has since admitted that this was one of his nearest brushes with death), he landed unharmed. He promptly liberated the customers and strolled (with a slew of photographers in his wake) to a nearby conference room for the official press launch.

Back to the Show

After the landing, visibly nervous Oelwang and the other Virgin Mobile leaders waited for him in the green room before the press briefing commenced. When Branson asked for a copy of his prepared remarks, Oelwang had them at the ready and handed them to Branson.

Branson squinted at the first page for ten seconds, before flipping to the second and third. His team waited for his comments, pen and paper poised for revisions. Branson cut the silence:

"I'm dyslexic – you put the lines too close together! I can't do the speech."

The air left the room. After three seconds of nervous glances and deafening silence, a grin sprang from Branson's goateed face – he began to laugh. Oelwang and the other team members realized he was joking, and they burst out laughing as well. Branson gave his speech, launched the business, and the rest is history.

And that, dear readers, was the beginning of Jean Oelwang and Richard Branson’s beautiful partnership. With so much pressure riding on the moment before them, Branson had engineered a situation in which his team was laughing together. Branson grasped a moment of extreme tension, and in that moment, he used humor to bring his team together, helping them feel comfortable and joyful. Oelwang recalls:

Joy and humor speed up the process to trust and respect. They create a safe space to grow a relationship. And I think from that moment Richard played that prank on me right before the launch of Virgin Mobile, that just set the scene for the rest of our relationship and partnership over the last 20 years... We joke all the time. I mean we have water fights. I dumped an ice bucket on Richard’s head once. Just silly things and moments where it’s bringing that levity in but never losing sight of the importance of the work we’re doing or sacrificing the quality of delivery.

A BIT ABOUT JEAN

Jean Oelwang began her career at the General Telephone & Electronics Corporation (“GTE”). GTE was an upright, conservative organization, in which hard work, deference to corporate hierarchy and “bleeding blue” were keys to success. Joking around, the irrelevant concept of “being yourself,” and focusing on anything other than the task at hand were all detrimental to one’s career prospects. Judging by name alone, GTE was ‘big corporate’ incarnate.³

In a well-meaning gesture, Oelwang’s first manager gave her two books when she started at the firm: Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, which provided her with a framework for how to succeed in the bleak, competitive battle zone of business, and Irma Rombauer’s recipe bible *The Joy of Cooking*, in case she didn’t make it in the corporate wars of America. Oelwang could choose between two life paths – the bleak, life-or-death struggle of the business world, or cook her way to domestic bliss. She managed to avoid both.

Exhibit 1: GTE Logo



After Oelwang arrived at Virgin Mobile Australia in 2000, her perspective on the business world changed completely. She remarked:

The first thing that I noticed when I started working for Virgin was the ability to be exactly who I was in the world. And that created this safe space for the type of joy that was relevant to me, and shared joy with others rather than the forced fun or joy that you had in corporate America. This was more an authentic type of joy and love in a company which I had not experienced...So many companies just try to force you into a box of getting rid of all the joy, getting rid of all the levity, and then Virgin does the opposite.

³ Fun fact – any company either commonly referred to via acronym or possessing “Industries” or “Electronics” at the end of its name is very likely to be a now defunct mid-twentieth century corporate conglomerate.

Oelwang and Branson quickly grew to become partners in driving positive change and good mischief. At Branson's request, Oelwang left Virgin Mobile Australia in 2003 to help him found Virgin Unite, the Virgin Group and Branson family's personal foundation. Oelwang had a history working with charities and starting up mobile phone companies, and she desired to spend more time in the intersections of business and not for profits. Branson and Oelwang discussed building a new type of organization - one that didn't simply dole out funds, but united people to help them change their communities and the broader world. One such effort was through their work with The Elders.

THE ELDERS

Four years later, Oelwang found herself in a meeting room with Branson and Peter Gabriel on Necker Island, Branson's Caribbean home. Branson had agreed to host a series of meetings to help shape The Elders, a group of independent global leaders founded by Nelson Mandela to work together for peace and human rights.⁴ The inaugural brainstorming included Archbishop Desmond Tutu, President Jimmy Carter, retired UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and other world leaders. President Carter defined the group's *raison d'être* in a subsequent interview:⁵

We don't claim to have any authority except our moral authority...When we speak privately to a leader about their human-rights abuses or the need for peace, we think the gravitas of our collective background may have an impact.

Months before, Branson and Gabriel had tasked Oelwang and her team with developing the schedule and programming for the retreat. Oelwang and her team had spent months planning every minute detail of the meetings. They had prepared elaborate daily schedules and compiled hundreds of pages of heavily researched presentations which detailed pressing human rights issues.

Branson, however, had other ideas. Oelwang recalled:

The evening before The Elders and their teams arrived, we all convened to go over the plan for the retreat. Richard and Peter Gabriel took one look at our materials and ***put our PowerPoints in the trash bin***. Richard and Peter said that they wanted to make sure that this [event] was more human. Richard insisted that we change the whole agenda to make half the day play and half the day work.

Objectively, this borders on ludicrous. World leaders were flying in from across the globe and dedicating multiple days to furthering the mission of peace and human rights. Branson was proposing they spend half of their time together "playing." Oelwang recalled:

I remember really pushing back and saying, 'we ***have*** to have the whole day focused on content. People are coming all the way here – they're going to expect that.'

⁴ Nelson Mandela's speech introducing The Elders and their mission and principles can be found here - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8TbajhXGgU0>.

⁵ Grove, Sophie, "Respect the Elders," *Monocle*, November 2012, Issue 58, Volume 6, pg. 76-78.

But Branson prevailed, and the team reworked the weekend agenda according to his half work / half play ratio. Oelwang continued:

The most beautiful thing happened. *Those afternoons of play were where the real work happened.* You had President Carter and Archbishop Tutu sitting in the sand on the beach creating the values for The Elders. It was this beautiful moment of realizing the importance of play, connection, joy in getting things done.

Gabriel and Branson also competed in teaching Archbishop Tutu and a Virgin Unite team member how to swim. Neither student drowned, but each remained far from challenging Michael Phelps for Olympic glory. Gabriel and Branson were both advised to maintain their current means of employment and withdraw their candidacy for Necker Island YMCA swim coach. All attendees, however, were highly impressed by Tutu's backstroke.⁷

While some viewed these playful activities as frivolous at first mention, Branson intuitively grasped the importance of balancing gravity with levity. Oelwang ensured that a foundation of intellectual rigor and valuable content was present -- which were critical to the success of the retreat. And Branson ensured there was space for playful activities to bring the group of luminaries closer together and help them achieve their goals. Teams need these playful moments to be able to unlock the most meaningful and purposeful things they intend to accomplish. Sometimes, a high-stakes, purpose-driven space, such as this once in a lifetime meeting with historic global figures to discuss all of the intractable problems in the world, is where levity is needed most.

Oelwang and Branson's partnership continued to blossom, as they worked together on numerous global projects founded by Virgin Unite. With other great partners, they founded The B Team, a group of leaders whose collective mission is to jumpstart a movement of business leaders driving better ways of doing business, for the wellbeing of people and the planet. They also established Ocean Unite, an organization which brings together conservationists, business leaders, philanthropists, and influential individuals who are concerned that the ocean and marine life face a questionable future, and whose goal is to protect at least 30% of the ocean by 2030.

The gist of it is that Oelwang and Branson not only had fun together, developing a lasting partnership replete with mischief and revelry, but they also did a bunch of good stuff for the world - which is pretty cool. Amen.

THE FLUSH HEARD ROUND THE ROOM

In August 2018, Oelwang and Branson traveled to Jamaica for a gathering to work with the Caribbean Leaders to make the Caribbean the world's first climate-smart zone.

This was a serious and urgent topic - with the recent hurricanes, many of the countries had lost everything.

⁷ The backstroke incident has been fabricated by the author for comedic effect. The swimming lesson episode actually occurred.

Branson was outfitted with a wireless microphone in advance of his prepared remarks. Like any proper Englishman, he was a proper tea devo-tea.⁸ Oelwang recalled that Branson had drank copious amounts that day, to stay hydrated and adequately caffeinated during the meetings.

In the early afternoon, Branson matter-of-factly left his chair to step out of the room in the middle of a scheduled speech. He shut the main conference room door. The noise of the door's closing registered on the public address system a bit more loudly than expected, but no bother. The speaker continued.

Ten seconds later, Jean heard the thud of a different door through the speakers. *That was peculiar*... the conference room doors were all closed, and nobody had left the room. The speaker paused for a split second, and restarted his remarks.

Within twenty seconds, the distinct noise of a toilet, flushed with moderate force, jolted the audience yet again. Oelwang held her breath, thinking to herself, *Oh dear, this couldn't be!*

The attendees whispered to their neighbors in a myriad of accents: "Is he going to the loo?" "Was that Branson?!" "Did you hear that?!" "He didn't turn off his microphone!" The International Panel on Plumbing Acoustics had begun.

Branson returned. He looked down at his wireless receiver. It was on – at max volume. The entire room burst into laughter. All eyes were on him. Jean cringed. *What will Sir Richard do? This might not end well....*

⁸ Shameless pun.

PAGE LEFT INTENTIONALLY BLANK FOR SUSPENSE.....

Branson burst out laughing, louder and harder than the others in the room. It was a badly needed break from the sobering discussions. Branson's lowbrow blunder was the highpoint of the day.

Although his initial comic action was unintentional, his response was more important than the folly itself. Branson could have been embarrassed and ashamed at his miscue, but instead, he embraced his mistake, laughed about it, and even celebrated it – reframing this moment of relative discomfort into one of hilarity. Oelwang recalled:

It created this moment of levity in a very serious room, and just lifted the room to a sense of joy. And it was again a gift that Richard gave... in service of joy for others.

EPILOGUE (THIS IS THE END WE SWEAR)

Readers, you have made it to the end of the case. We congratulate you for your perseverance. Now bugger off!

Still here?

I see. You want to know what this all means...

Here are the reasons why we believe this example is so important, as well as a few tips to take with you, young Padawan, as you venture out into this or other worlds:⁹

Balance

Levity never comes at the expense of the work -- but instead furthers the mission. It quickens the process of trust and respect, makes us more resilient in times of stress, and ultimately makes us more effective toward achieving the goals we take extremely seriously. Branson's relationship with Oelwang is a shining example of not only the power of but the *super powers* created by balancing humor and purpose.

Partnership

Know which direction you lean naturally and find someone to balance you. So that you can flourish in whatever you do best. Humor can help cultivate lasting partnerships,

Authenticity

The culture in which Oelwang found herself at Virgin (versus that of GTE) fostered authenticity. Employees could be exactly who they were in the world -- while at work. Fun -- but authentic joy and levity. In all its quirky manifestations.

Mindset

Be on the precipice of a smile rather than a frown. We know it's super hard, but try to look at moments of stress (insurance fiasco) and discomfort / embarrassment / things going wrong (toilet

⁹ A Padawan, also known as a Padawan learner, Padawan apprentice, or Apprentice, referred to a Force-sensitive adolescent who trained in the Jedi Order to one day become a full-fledged Jedi. Padawans were known as Jedi younglings at first, and trained in classroom settings with multiple students and a teacher.

flush) as opportunities to bond and laugh -- rather than moments to freak out and be embarrassed by forever and ever and ever - less Sixteen Candles, more Ferris Bueller's Day Off.

Practical Work Mumbo Jumbo (for those of you so inclined)

Try to bake in play and levity when designing workshops, gatherings, and team meetings – especially when they are heavy and important. Give space for unstructured creativity like brainstorming, ways for really smart people (you hired them so of course they're smart duh) to feel comfortable sharing creative ideas.

Appendix 1 - Photo of Jean Oelwang and Richard Branson



Source: Virgin Foundation
Photo Credit: Victoria Dawe