

Capitalism and Morality

AN EMPIRE WITHOUT A KING: VYING FOR THE THRONE

Jomana Krupinski

Jomana is an Environmental Studies graduate from WJU and is currently enrolled in WJU's MBA program.

In the book *Executive Suite* by Cameron Hawley, the author describes the implications and consequences of the protagonist's negligence in developing a succession plan for his corporation. This is the root of the conflict in the book, as the company's five vice-presidents compete for his place as president of the company. Although developing a succession plan should be routine, the United States Small Business Association describes on its web site that the importance of a succession plan is often underestimated:

“Rather than a single, dramatic movement, the smooth succession of a business more resembles a flow of events that occurs over time. Like a well-run relay race, the handing over of a company should be graceful, carefully strategized and well executed if it is to be successful. Unfortunately, the majority of business owners neglect to plan so seamlessly for their own succession.”

In the novel, Hawley brings to the forefront this concept of corporate succession that is so critical to the longevity of a business, and yet somehow it slips through the cracks of the hugely successful and powerful Tredway Corporation. This oversight, small though it may seem, creates a chasm that at times appears insurmountable except at the risk of the company's destruction by the hands of its own executives. Daunted by the task of voting in the next President, the Board of Directors and Vice-Presidents find themselves in a tangle of alliances that shift as quickly as stock in the market.

The King's Men

Avery Bullard has the world's respect, or at least the business world's. He is literally a household name to those who are associated in any way to Tredway Corporation: its employees hail him, their wives curse him, and the company's stockholders watch his every move. But he is a man of superlative talent. Few remember his humble beginnings as a salesperson, but Frederick Alderson is one who recalls Avery Bullard not as a president, but as a designer and a production specialist: “You didn't know he was a designer, did you? That's something a lot of people who haven't been as close to him as I've been don't know...another thing a lot of people don't appreciate about Mr. Bullard [is] the way he understands production” (85). Eventually, Bullard's sales cunning lands an account that carries Tredway through the Depression, and thus, his rise to the top is set.

As President of Tredway Corporation, Bullard employs that same cunning, mingled with his business knowledge and life experience to command the actions, and often the lives, of his Vice-Presidents, who submissively comply. His smarts are too expert and his dealings too deft to question, and the Vice-Presidents' respect for him soon turns to idolatry. Frederick Alderson believes wholeheartedly that “there isn't anything that man can't do if he puts his mind to it!” (85). Even someone like Luigi, the elevator

operator, recognizes the innate power radiating from Avery Bullard's presence. In fact, Luigi compares Bullard to the Duke from his home country: "...there was some aura about the Duke that made him unmistakably the man above all other men, the man who owned all that there was to own...There was nothing in the world that the Duke did not notice" (36). Even to Luigi, Bullard was royal in his own Tredway kingdom. And the men of the court included Frederick W. Alderson, Vice-President and Treasurer; Jesse Grimm, Vice-President for Manufacturing; J. Walter Dudley, vice President for Sales; Loren P. Shaw, Vice-President and Comptroller; and Don Walling, Vice-President for Design and Development. After Bullard's death, these men vie for the Presidency, and do whatever they can to create alliances that will assure them the position.

By the end of the novel, however, it is not alliances that put Don Walling in Bullard's place. It is something about Walling that the others lack—an almost-forgotten sense of pride in himself and the legacy that Bullard left behind. Almost by divine intervention, Walling finds the words to deliver a speech that empowers and motivates the other men to carry on the legacy that Bullard had originally intended to hand down: a company whose force behind it is the "pride of thousands of men," not a company whose only measure of accomplishment is money (333).

The King's Mind

The plot of this novel is controlled by psychology, or more frankly, manipulation. The plot exists solely because Avery Bullard is a man who has many talents, but not enough foresight to sense the urgency behind creating a succession plan and choosing an executive Vice-President immediately after the death of John Fitzgerald. Days, weeks, months go by without a plan, and without a replacement. Bullard also doesn't have enough prescience to realize how this will affect the thoughts and actions of his Vice-Presidents. If he did, he would surely have recognized the anxiety felt by the men in his executive offices and their growing animosity toward each other, and in Shaw's case, toward Bullard himself: "He [Shaw] hated Avery Bullard with the special hatred of the tortured for the torturer" (77).

However, the flip side allows for the possibility that Bullard does in fact recognize this situation and takes advantage of it. Perhaps Bullard's extraordinary abilities in management are really that of manipulation. Knowing his men well enough to predict their reactions during the period of suspense may be a trump card in his pocket. Knowing their ambitions and talents, he is also aware of their desires to be his right-hand man. Even the seating arrangement at meetings is important to Alderson, as is evident when Shaw forces him to give up his seat at the table: "Shaw had stolen the one most important thing in his life—the seat at Avery Bullard's right hand" (83). This child-like adoration is a symptom of the men's needs for guidance and leadership. Perhaps Bullard's delay in choosing his executive vice-president is not out of negligence; perhaps he is observing the performance of his men under pressure. Although we know little of Bullard's thought processes, this doesn't seem to be too far removed from his original plan to choose an executive vice-president. He intended to gather them together and hit them with a proposal that they hadn't seen coming. "Then he would pick the man who showed up best" (7). This trial-by-fire attitude seems to be his method of choice for selecting his executives.

Nonetheless, one wonders at Bullard's extraordinary abilities. He would have to literally be a master of psychology to command so much of his men's respect, while keeping them happy with their positions in the lineup. Again, there is evidence in the novel that manipulation is key. When Jesse Grimm built his factory he secretly worried that Bullard would allow Don Walling, the architect, to interfere. However, without a word spoken about the issue, Bullard "detained" Walling in Pittsburgh so Grimm might have the freedom he wanted. Grimm, of course, views this as a favor from Bullard and offers his gratitude. Walling, however, knows nothing of Grimm's concerns and feels the warmest regard for Bullard for giving him the opportunity to work in Pittsburgh. It's a win-win situation for all, but if Walling had the slightest idea that he might have been detained for a purpose, it is likely he would harbor resentment

toward both Bullard *and* Grimm. Adding to the drama, Grimm secretly occupies a long-standing resentment of his own toward Walling for trying to be like Avery Bullard. But because of Bullard, this potentially explosive relationship is kept at bay.

Despite his gracefulness in dealing with his executives, one wonders how such a capable man could overlook the importance of having a succession plan. It's not as if Bullard does not understand its importance, especially since Caswell makes sure to remind him that "Continuity of management is an important consideration to anyone holding large blocks of an industrial security"(4). Bullard just does not perceive it as urgent. It is not until the investment fund executives begin asking why a second-in-command had not been appointed that Bullard begins to think seriously about the issue, implying that a succession plan was not on the top of his priority list. Moreover, his perception of succession plans is simply that a big corporation is "supposed" to have one, and that if he didn't choose an executive vice-president soon, "the chart just wouldn't look right" (4). This illustrates that, to Bullard, a succession plan is simply a task that must be completed, not a significant contribution to the longevity of the company.

Confident in his health and fortune, Bullard all but denies his mortality. He believes that there are "nine full years ahead of him...they would be the best years of his life. He wasn't looking for another Avery Bullard" to replace him (6). Bullard says that he isn't looking for someone like himself, but clearly the prospect of leaving any of the men on his list in charge of the company is unappealing to him. Thus, his denial is twofold: he denies the fact that his length of life is uncertain, and he denies his true feelings that no one else is fit for his job but himself. Despite the fact that the company was lucky enough to have discovered the right man for the job in Walling, Bullard's lack of consideration for a succession plan was a dangerous oversight that could have led the company to a much worse fate.

The King's Lessons

Much can be learned from the events in *Executive Suite*, primarily the importance of developing a succession plan, but also the struggles one might face in dealing with office politics, team building, and working in a company that is a one-man show. Most of the lessons are taught by Avery Bullard himself, but surprisingly, Erica Martin shares her unique perceptions of office politics that at first might be overlooked.

For example, when Bullard leaves her with the task of informing each of the vice-presidents of a meeting on short notice, she is faced with the dilemma of whom to tell first. "It was one of those little things that should not matter, but she knew that it would. If Mr. Alderson were to discover that she had called Mr.Grimm before she called him, he would be sure to give it some frightening supersignificance" (39). Sure enough, when Miss Martin leaves the last office, Mr. Shaw's, he watches her as she returns to the staircase, "confirming the fact that he had been the last one that she had told" (39). This leaves Miss Martin feeling frightened, although she could not understand why she should be afraid of Loren Shaw.

This competition appears healthy at the start, but it makes one wary of following Bullard's example in the way that he builds his teams. It makes sense that he would choose men who have impressive abilities and strengths in their specialty (i.e. sales, accounting, manufacturing), but this could also be the Achilles heel of the corporation. It is important to match one man's weakness with another man's strength, but if those strengths are too specialized, one man cannot do another man's job. The president of a company would ideally have enough knowledge to effectively make decisions regarding all realms of the business, even if he is not the absolute best man in any of them.

Because of this, Bullard backs himself into a corner by being the "man" in the one-man show. Despite the fact that this limits the company in that Bullard is the only man truly able to make the best decisions for Tredway Corporation, some believe that a one-man show is the best way to build a company. Julius

Stiegal claims to have watched companies his whole life, and the ones that are successful always owe their success to one man. “Always when you find a good company, it is what you call a one-man show. You have the right man, you gave a good company. You don’t have the right man, you have nothing” (11). However, the down side is that the “one man” must make so many sacrifices. For Bullard, his sacrifice is his wife and any future thought of a family. Personal friendships are few, given that most of the people he knows are related to his job, and he must always be the diplomat. He is always on call, and his successes and failures are not just his; they affect every person in his business. Bullard even admits to Luigi that sometimes he feels like Luigi is “the only real friend I have in this whole damned company” (33).

Although the best man for the job fortuitously attains Avery Bullard’s position in the end, Bullard had taken a huge gamble with Tredway Corporation by not securing its success in a carefully strategized and well-executed succession plan. Today’s business leaders would do well to heed the lessons Hawley offers in *Executive Suite*. From psychology to office politics, there are many examples from the book that apply to business today. But most importantly, the overarching theme is the importance of succession plans. Hawley aptly creates a fictional world that illustrates, and warns against, the harsh reality that without a successor, even the most thriving business risks collapse.