

## Day 71: September 25, 2010

There are a lot of trials and tribulations to running something. I know many of you can relate as you have led your own organizations, companies, or teams. Today, is definitely one of those trial days.

It started out okay. The new team was up on watch. The waves were relatively calm (at least calm enough to work in). I had not slept much, but mostly due to some late night caffeine than anything else. The sun was out and work was moving forward. All in all a routine day shaping up with good energy from a new team.

The first complicating factor came with the weather. While on helm watch last night, I was reviewing the upcoming weather. It showed a rather concerning looking storm forming off the Gulf coast of Florida on the 30th. I reasoned that we likely did not want to be sailing in a direction where a storm was likely to be moving towards us. It is still a week away and it is still just a forecast, but I made note to discuss it with Captain Bob in the morning.

By morning, however, the forecast had changed. The storm was now shaping up in the southern Gulf and would be headed towards us from below on the 30th. Bob agreed with me that maybe Florida and the Bryde's whale were not the right targets for this leg. However, by afternoon the forecast again showed the storm forming by Florida again. Moreover, the forecast for the weather we were in was way off as the seas were stronger than predicted. So there we were in a conundrum, no clear picture on the weather but a 7-day forecast that Florida may get a very difficult storm. No clear bead on where to go.

Bob then noted we were 30 miles from Deepwater Horizon and an idea formed in my head. The oil is gone so we could make a beeline for the site of the accident. See the epicenter of the largest oil crisis in US history for ourselves and then head west for a couple of days looking for sperm whales. After that we could see what the weather holds and either head for Florida or resume working west. The predictions are not great and the work will not be easy, but it should be doable. So off we headed to Deepwater Horizon.

We were able to pass within a mile and a half of the site. We did not attempt to get closer as there was no need. They ignored us while we took pictures and of course water samples. No whales or dolphin were seen or heard (and they used to be here), just a bunch of flying fish and a few birds. While we were there a sudden squall came up and put a dark cloud over one of the relief wells. I took a photo as it seemed a remarkable coincidence. That photo is attached. I did a lot of thinking there, but those thoughts have fled for now due to the rest of the day.

The weather and a plan was quite the conundrum. Frustrating not to be sure whether to go right or left, but the call I received in the evening made we also wonder which end was up. You may recall I wrote about my previous thoughts about our holds being full

and the need to get the samples in safely. Well, I have worried about those samples for some time now and today it hit a fever pitch. All of the samples were to arrive in Portland this morning. The land lab team was ready to go and get them all settled in and put away. I was almost ready to breathe. Then my son James called. He was to be the recipient of the samples as USM shipping is closed on Saturdays. It was 5 pm. The samples had not arrived and FedEx did not know where they were. My heart sank.

The challenge here is that we have frozen, refrigerated and warm samples. It is also ALL of the Gulf samples collected so far save for some of the cell lines shipped back before. I have heard and experienced horror shipping stories on frozen samples being thawed and warm samples being frozen and so on. I could not imagine how FedEx would get these right and anticipated the worst. Moreover, the samples were not packed to last many days. The icepacks are likely to thaw and the dry ice to melt. There is nothing worse than being in the middle of the Gulf and having this kind of crisis evolve.

Plus FedEx could not (or would not) tell us what they were. They might be in Memphis. But the Memphis plane left and no one could say where it was going on whether they were on board. James would dutifully leave instructions with FedEx and FedEx would fail to enter them into the computer and events would change. The hours passed. No news. More passing of the buck. No idea where the samples are. The frustration and the worry making each minute last an hour and each hour a day. With the lateness of the hour, hope of getting them shrank and a Monday delivery loomed large. I just hope(d) they'd be okay. It's 10:30 pm on the East Coast of the US now and we still do not know for sure.

If there is a silver lining to this story, it's that the problem fell into James' lap and he rose to the challenge and may have saved the day. James can be a bit of a dog with a bone on these matters and that tenacity was the key. He was not only not going to be denied these samples, but he was going to be prepared for any eventuality.

FedEx would not tell him where the plane was going. Fine. James then arranged a plan for pickup in every major airport on the Eastern seaboard. Using folks we know, they would cover many airports and then he would either drive to New York or New Jersey or Boston and meet them. One way or another, once those samples reached the ground, James would have them in his possession within hours. That is... if they left Memphis. The only thing we knew for sure is that they would not arrive in Portland.

James invested his entire day and night in the search and rescue of these samples and he has them close now. He last update of about a few minutes ago was that the plane had landed in Boston. A Fedex agent promised him that he would go on the plane himself, collect the samples and hold them for James's arrival. I now wait for that moment breath held, fingers and toes crossed.

Then of course they have to make it home and into the freezers, refrigerators and incubators. I worried about how James was going to manage all of these samples in the middle of the night himself as it's a LOT of work. But James informs me he is in

constant contact with Amie, a key member of my lab, and I am sure with Amie's help all will get put away quickly and thoroughly. But, I won't be able to breathe until they do.

After this experience with FedEx, I do find myself wondering "What can brown do for me"?

Stay tuned.

John

