

A Bacon Scrapin'

"Blissburg"

By Barry S. Wolfe

Bacon Scrapins are the little bits of meat left in the greasy fry pan. They're tasty, but the 'nutrition' sometimes needs searching for. This tale is a bacon scrapin.

Good evening, council

Once upon a time, long long ago, and far far away, there was a community of 10,000 souls who had settled together alongside a dependable river. Their tributary river contributed to the flow of a much larger river - a couple hundred yards downstream. They had named their community Blissburg.

The early settlers had built a dam, and harnessed its energy to permit the manufacture of furniture, boots and farm equipment. It was a thriving, harmonious community with shared values, interests, wants, needs and aspirations that were recognized and respected by its coterie of municipal councilmen, for at that time, 1933, all municipal councillors were men.

However, 1933 was no longer a prosperous time for a community located on the far eastern edges of the province, and downstream from the nation's capital whose political effluent flowed down the nearby river and its hot air drifted past residents' ears.

A flu outbreak in 1918 had decimated the population and the world-wide depression had lasting effects on Blissburg's economy. It was difficult for residents to find the money demanded for local taxes.

The council, on the recommendation of its town manager, had granted a local employer an exemption from the charges it was due to pay, resulting in a loss of \$150,000 of income to the community. The council had also approved an expenditure of \$30,000 to purchase a new staff-requested book-keeping system to more efficiently keep track of their debts, the money they did not have and the income they were no longer receiving. No money had been spent, however, on any methods to improve communications between the citizens and council and staff. Communication was not considered a priority in Blissburg in 1933.

The citizens were unhappy, by 1933, with the council and its administration in Blissburg. There was mistrust and division, within the previously cohesive community, about the decision-making process. The citizens were simmering with turmoil at the fact that council and administration were not listening to them. Distrust was rampant.

Therefore, the town manager, after an 18-month delay, gave in and initiated a project to get advice from an expert about how the community should change its strategic direction. Because it was perceived by the administrator that the one and only expert in Blissburg Township was already fully employed, an outside consultant was hired.

The consultant met with the senior administration for extensive one-on-one conversations. She met with the council for about ¼ the time spent with the administrators. She met for less than 1% of her allotted time with the citizens.

During a one-hour meeting with the citizens, she shared some 'outcomes' produced from her discussions with the administration and council. She stated that the two groups had indicated that they needed to "*achieve common ground between council and staff and build momentum for positive change*", and "*gather meaningful input from staff and the community.*" One of their goals was to address the deplorable level of trust by citizens in their council and staff.

This was not news to the citizens. They already knew this and had been trying to tell them for years. Some were hearing, but still no one was listening.

When the consultant reported her findings to council and staff in public session, she restated the outcome differently. She said there was now a need to "*Build a shared vision and achieve common ground among Members of Council.*" No longer, in the sanitized version, was it mentioned of any responsibility or accountability by the hired staff for the lack of shared vision or common ground within the Blissburg corporation. The need to "*achieve common ground between council and staff*" was gone. No mention of staff.

In fact, the next morning, two councilors were found huddled in the gutter under a horse-drawn public bus, commiserating with each other at how they had been tossed there by this top-down consultation process.

The report concluded that all was great in Blissburg and the future was bright as long as it maintained its current direction. No citizens' opinions were changed. Thus, the town manager decided to change perceptions, if not reality.

She promised that changes were coming. She had a plan to correct the relationship among management, council. Citizens were not mentioned. There was to be peace, harmony and compatibility within the Blissburg council chamber.

And this is the managerial process used to make that be, in 1933, in Blissburg Township!

First, reality was redefined by changing the titles for job positions. Job titles may have real descriptive meaning, or they may be restructured to have associated meanings which are mis-leading. If carefully manipulated fancy titles can instill false perceptions of what the roles, duties, responsibilities and forms of accountability actually are, and reverse peoples' perceptions.

A 'sanitary engineer' is someone who engineers a change in the position of a bag of garbage from the curb into the back of a truck. A fancy title, manipulates perceptions of outsiders, makes a person in that role eligible to simply assume different levels of responsibility and, if unchallenged, to act beyond the tips of their skis.

In Blissburg, usage of the "*Town Manager*" title was changed to "*Chief Administration Officer*", and subsequently to "*Corporate Leadership Team Leader*". Then the small group of senior administrators' title was changed from "*Administration Team*" to "*Corporate Leadership Team.*" and the recently hired senior town manager, who was on probation, was named the *Acting Corporate Leadership Team Leader*".

In fact, in the Blissburg budget document it was noted that, "*Council supports staff in fulfilling the core mandates of Blissburg*". In this newly defined world, the elected council was responsible for supporting the actions of the newly named *Corporate Leadership Team*, and not the other way around.

She who controls the flow of information, controls knowledge. She who controls knowledge controls power. Next, the person responsible for Blissburg communications and strategic planning was let go. That left an

opening for a new communications person. But none could be found before the new terms and conditions specifying the relationship between management and council were pushed through.

Therefore, to fill this created gap, the *Corporate Leadership Team Leader* took it upon herself to become the spokesperson for Blissburg. She appeared in articles in the local paper. Her visage, smiling regally, brought enhanced focus to her in one of the articles. The public perception of who was the spokesperson for Blissburg Township was blurred.

The citizens knew, what this profile advertising foretold. That the old simmering dispute between the staff and council - about who held the Alpha role – was coming to a climax.

Sure enough, she soon presented to the council her solution how to resolve the issue of the relationship between the leadership team and council, and who was really in charge in Blissburg. The recently renamed Corporate Leadership Team Leader presented her report.

The Blissburg Council could not believe their luck. Here was the escape clause from all the blame that it had been painted with.

No longer did councillors have to think for themselves. They now only had to consult with and get approval from the Corporate Leadership Team Leader) before making any decisions. They now just had to ask, and she would answer all questions for them. Nothing could be easier.

No longer would councillors ask questions of the *Corporate Leadership Team Leader* at a council meeting unless they had previously vetted it with her. This was like going to a job interview at the Blissburg boot plant and having all the interview questions before going in. Sweet!

This, was definitely more efficient. No surprises, no need for a staff person to have to prove they knew what they were doing without prior warning and opportunity to prepare a position on a topic.

No longer would a councillor respond to questions or concerns expressed to them by constituents, based on their knowledge and perspective. They no longer needed to know anything. They no longer had to have a perspective based on their values of the public good. Now a councillor had to consult, to

get the *Corporate Leadership Team Leader's* approved answer, before responding to a citizen.

This system was much easier for councillors because they no longer had to think for themselves nor consult widely with their citizens. They could just say, "*I'm not allowed to give you the information because the Corporate Leadership Team Leader won't let me tell you. In fact, they won't even tell me.*"

No longer were the peoples' representatives, their councillors, permitted to attend meetings with staff and consultants and potential contractors or legal advisors. This would be much more effective for internal decision-making because the messy opinions or factual input of the citizens, as conveyed by a councillor, would no longer have any influence on a decision.

It became quickly apparent to council that these new requirements, imposed on them by the hired staff, would free both councillors and the Corporate Leadership Team, from the uncomfortable situation of actually considering citizens' values, interests, needs, wants, goals and aspirations in the decision-making process.

All the messiness of decision-making in a democracy was now removed. No longer did councillors have to be concerned about their influence as councillors, nor the input of citizens, in determining the policies, direction and activities in the Blissburg Township community.

They could leave it all to the *Corporate Leadership Team Leader* to make those challenging, value-laden, personal-opinion decisions.

And it worked wonderfully, in 1933, in Blissburg.

Councillors found that now they could visit with their constituents, hear what they had to say, and then just show up at a council meeting - with no need for boring preparation or having to read and understand multi-page documents.

The *Corporate Leadership Team Leader* would write a report on a topic of her own choosing, that she alone had reviewed, and then she alone would present at a public council meeting. No need for the messy process of consultation – just go it alone unhampered by citizens' input.

Councillors in Blissburg were aware of the new rules that prevented inquiry and debate, and thus for appearances' sake, asked only soft-ball questions.

She employed the 'behind-the-curtains' wizardry of verbal smoke-and-mirrors, a glib tongue, obtuse bureaucrat verbiage, and circuitous false logic gobbledygook of 'this is best practice – trust me' and 'everyone's doing it too – trust me' in her reports.

The brains of all the councillors were amazingly transformed, they became mesmerized, compliant sycophants. Rumours at the time, that councillors' eyeballs actually rolled in cartoonish confusion in their heads while listening to reports by the *Corporate Leadership Team Leader*, were just rumours.

It was a spectacular wonder to behold. Council was now acting in harmony with management. There was coordination among them and no apparent angst between staff and council. There was no exchange of uncomfortable positions, representing various citizens' input, to be heard.

At the call of a vote, council's arms would rise compliantly in universal acceptance, and in a coordinated motion, fall upon their tables for rubber-stamped approval.

No longer heard were the plaintive wails of a senior manager that "*council was asking them to do too much for their teeny-weenie size, nor that such a requested report would require a major investment in time or use of outside experts, nor that council was now changing a direction previously given and that's not fair to make us change directions to meet the Blissburg citizens' changing needs.*"

No longer were these feeble pleas to be heard, because no longer did council have the opportunity to challenge its hired staff to do anything the staff did not want to do. Staff had created a system that now restricted Blissburg councillors from meeting freely with staff and each other outside council meetings.

Seeking factual information by councillors had been a fruitless wander through a maze of distractions. This new system, with the Blissburg council's approval, removed any need to seek confirmation, to investigate, to seek information and knowledge, and as a bonus, prevented anything from being

presented in public that had not been previously sanitized or scrubbed out of existence by the *Corporate Leadership Team Leader*.

She could continue to create her own council meeting agendas containing the items that she wanted to appear, how she wanted them to appear, and when she wanted them to appear – including when key council members, who might be obstreperous and mess up a preferred vote result, were known to be absent.

Reports would now, with the passing by council of report ACLTL-1933-69, continue to contain only the options and recommendations that the Acting *Corporate Leadership Team Leader* preferred. She presented another report and had her title changed again, to become *Almighty Corporate Leadership Team Leader*. She was now Alpha boss in Blissburg and the Mayor had better be compliant, and stay in his place in line! Her father would be impressed, she hoped.

The staff's message to council and all citizens was clear. They were the professionals. They were the experts. They were the only ones who knew what was best for the citizens of Blissburg.

The councillors of Blissburg thereafter continued blithely along their ways, hearing what their constituents wanted, and then not listening to those desires when they voted. They were persistent in raising their arms in universal acceptance, and then rubber-stamping of the reports with a coordinated smash of palms on desks.

Decision making was truly blissful, in the sanitized echo chamber of Blissburg council.

The only problem was the continuing simmering discontent and mistrust among the citizens. But that was deemed insignificant and of no concern, in Blissburg Township, in 1933.

The only thing of significance was the carefully orchestrated system of decision-making power that now existed. The ACLTL (Almighty Corporate Leadership Team Leader) now had control over the definition of transparency, arbitrary control over access to and the interpretation of what was accurate, or complete information.

She had control over what would or would not appear on council's agenda, and thus control over citizens' input and influence in decision-making.

She even had the power to decide whether a citizen could even appear to speak before Blissburg council, and what they could present. Much more efficient. Democracy was so messy.

However, as often occurs when the fates converge, it happened that a nosey little girl, who had read widely about events through history, had noticed a pattern of events in Blissburg that matched events she had read about that had occurred previously, elsewhere.

She put this sequence of events together and shared her observations with her mother. She revealed the machinations of the wizardly Almighty Corporate Leadership Team Leader. Whispers of doubt, added to the existing distrust, started to spread through Blissburg. The whispers became mumbles and the Almighty Corporate Leadership Team Leader, heard about it.

She threatened sedition, slander, subversion – the three s's. She threatened to have the girl removed from her mother's charge and placed in the "*Industrial House of Refuge*" located upstream in the nation's capital city.

The mother's whimpering supplications - begging mercy - resulted in an act of managerial magnificence, a compromise punishment. The girl was, instead, banned from going anywhere near the Blissburg Township building and was confined to a closed room for 10 hours, over two consecutive days, and forced to write these words, over and over again.

"I will not seek the truth.

I will not see the truth.

I will not speak the truth.

I will not hear the truth.

I will not listen to the truth.

I will ask permission before I speak, and be a good little girl.

I will do what my superiors tell me, for they truly know what is best for me."

The events of Blissburg, in 1933, have come to light only recently. The girl's revelations were denied by the town manager, alternative explanations were published in news articles, and very shortly it was forgotten by Blissburg. An intense P.R. campaign of perception white-washing, and redefining of facts followed.

The little girl's mother, after her daughter's release from that 10-days of mental and physical confinement, recorded the events and left the document as part of her worldly estate. The mother's will specified that the white-washed events of 1933 were only to be released to the public 90 years after their occurrence, and the family's law firm only recently passed them to their descendants.

That's the end of **this part** of my whimsical tale.

And here we are.

There is also a **Post Script**, which is really the **prequel** to the story and which answers the question, *"In the first place, how did a single woman, in 1933, in small 'c' conservative, male-dominated Ontario, become the Blissburg town manager and the "Acting Corporate Leadership Team Leader?"*

With each election cycle there is often a turn-over and change in councillors' faces who in spite of their initial optimism, eventually become compliant and beaten down by the persistence of *"the system"*.

With each turn-over of managers, the words change, but **really**, nothing seems to change. Bureaucratic inertia is hard to overcome.

For every persistent manager, there seems to be at least one persistent, labour-intensive citizen. The task of bureaucracy is the wear down the citizenry's demands to have an effective voice.

Decision making in a democracy is so messy and so mentally fatiguing. Especially if one includes citizens in the process. It's easier to manage, unfettered, by keeping them out of it.

I'm aware that my delegations to council in the past have failed to be deemed informative or of instructional value.

Therefore, I chose to give you all a break tonight, and just relate a whimsical tale. A simple, fictional tale to entertain.

The clerk will have an electronic copy for attachment to the official minutes of this meeting.

Tomorrow this tale will be found on my website www.thisiswilmot.ca under the drop-down menu, *Bacon Scrapins*. There citizens will find other whimsical tales I have written. This one will add to the list.

See you all again in December for “Season’s Greetings”.

Be well, and “Good night”.

Barry Wolfe, Baden

P.S. – This Post Script answers a question frequently asked of the author. “*In the first place how did a single woman, in small ‘c’ conservative, male-dominated Ontario, become the Blissburg town manager and “Acting Corporate Leadership Team Leader?”*”

The answer is, “*In the usual way!*”

Let us remember the time period is about 1933. . .

The woman, who was hired on probation as the town manager and made herself Almighty Corporate Team Leader, came from a wealthy family. Her father was the sole owner of the Blissburg Boot Compan. He was an influential man in Blissburg Township, and that region of Ontario.

She was the middle child, between an older brother who was soon taken in to learn the business alongside his father. She had a younger brother who was spoiled by their mother as “the baby” in the family, and thus became the focus of her mother’s attention and something of a scoundrel and parasite upon the family’s wealth and patience.

As middle children sometimes do, she became resentful of the lack of attention and respect for her intelligence, to which she believed she was due. Her father had become something of a curmudgeon in her opinion, and had resisted all her attempts to be brought into the business.

Her father, growing weary of her nagging, in 1932, gave her a one-year test position as a sales representative for the boot company, travelling up and down river to contact potential buyers. Her glib tongue made the small business owners weak at the knees from her animated spiel, and her voluptuously animated presentations literally made their eyes roll in their heads.

Her sales successes led her to grow more self-confident and more persistent in her goal of having a role in leading the business. Her father and brother were inundated with her ideas of how the business could be better run, and decided that they needed a strategy to get rid of her.

Her father was a member of the Blissburg Board of Trade, and the Chamber of Commerce. Also, as a member of the Downtown Business Improvement Association, he had been critical in the financing of three new flag poles in the town centre upon which were now proudly displayed the national, provincial and Township flags. His name was on a nearby plaque attesting to his generosity.

So, "*in the usual way*", by using his influence, he pressured his good friend the mayor, and two sycophantic council members. They finally relented, and gave her a probationary chance – for six months. He got his daughter appointed as the Acting Corporate Leadership Team Leader.

Father and older brother were relieved. They had solved two problems with one action. One, she was now off their backs and onto the council's. Two, she was off their financial books, and the tax payers had to carry her on their backs.

Like I said, "*In the usual way!*"

Thus, the story continues, as related above.