

Felix and “The Wolverine Syndrome”

Felix was enjoying his new home, relaxing on a lily pad in the pond behind Alice’s divisional headquarters, when he spotted Alice approaching.

She sat down in a small folding chair she carried with her and surveyed the area, breathing deeply a time or two. She studied Felix for a few moments, still marveling at the wonder of a talking frog, and wondering if anyone else believed Felix could actually talk. She knew that more than a few of her peers thought Felix was a hoax and that she was a ventriloquist. But she was glad to leave things that way; it saved her and Felix both a lot of grief.

“What’s on your mind?” asked Felix.

“Nothing much,” replied Alice, “I’m just trying to understand something.”

“And what might that be?” asked Felix.

“Well, we’re in the midst of queuing up a series of improvements to one of our core processes and, as we usually do, we sent the proposed changes out to the affected units for review and comment. Some of the comments we’ve received are useful and a couple even plugged some holes we hadn’t spotted, but a few seem to be suggesting modifications just for the sake of suggesting modifications.”

“And that surprises you?” remarked Felix.

“No,” answered Alice, “I’ve seen this on many occasions over the years; I’m just puzzled by it. These comments come from solid players and I know they’ll support the changes when they’re rolled out, but I just don’t understand what seems to me to be pointless nit-picking and so I thought I’d come talk it over with you.”

Felix studied Alice for a moment and then asked, “Do you know what a wolverine is?”

“Not really,” replied Alice, frowning and looking a bit quizzical. “I know it’s some kind of wild animal and that it’s supposed to be pretty fierce but that’s about the extent of my knowledge.”

“A wolverine is – pound for pound – one of the fiercest animals alive. Few large predators will mess with it. Wolverines used to be found in Michigan but they haven’t been seen there for years. Most of them are up in Canada.”

“C’mon, Felix,” said Alice, “come to the point.”

“I am, I am,” said Felix. “Wolverines regularly bring down prey larger than themselves and of course they can’t eat all that at one time. So, they mark their kills by urinating on them. That way, they can return to the kill later on and the smell of their own urine identifies it as theirs.”



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“Yuck!” said Alice. “Where are you going with this?”

“Bear with me, Alice,” said Felix. “Now it just so happens that when a wolverine comes upon a kill made by another wolverine, it, too, will urinate on the kill, thereby making it theirs as well, and then help themselves to a meal.”

“Felix, what does this have to do with my concerns?”

“Well,” replied Felix, “when it comes to changes, people are a lot like wolverines; they have to pee on things to make them theirs.”

Alice gave Felix a blank look and then started laughing. “I get it,” she said, “all those little nickel-and-dime changes people propose are their way of establishing ownership in the initiative.”

“That’s right,” said Felix. “I call it ‘The Wolverine Syndrome’.”

“And what do I do about it?” asked Alice.

“Why do anything?” inquired Felix. “After all, these little modifications people propose don’t seriously affect the larger initiative. If you reject them, you reject the people who proposed them, but if you accept them, you get buy-in and support for the larger initiative.”

“Where the problem arises,” continued Felix, “is with the people who crafted the original initiative. They are so vested in it and have such a high sense of ownership that they tend to automatically resist what they view as meddling. They become very protective of what they see as their baby. And so you wind up with a small group of people with a high sense of ownership and everyone else on the outside looking in.”

Alice thought for a moment and then said, “By golly, Felix, I think you’re right.” With that, she stood, folded her chair, turned and started to leave.

Felix called out after her, “What are you going to do?”

Alice looked back over her shoulder and said, “I’m going to see what else I can get them to pee on.”