

Smoke Before the Meeting

On humility, authority, and the danger of becoming useful but not trusted



Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

There is a moment before certain conversations when the air changes. You feel it before a word is spoken. The room does not get louder. It gets quieter. The saloon doors have already closed. The smoke is already drifting toward the ceiling in lazy uncertain ribbons. Someone sets a glass down just a little too loudly. A chair scrapes. A cough lands in the wrong place. And everyone pretends not to notice that something has shifted.

That is where I am tonight.

Not in the street. Not beneath a high sun with hands hovering over holsters. This is not the kind of conflict that announces itself with drama. This is subtler. Polite faces. Controlled tones. Measured words chosen carefully. Heat moving underneath the floorboards. Nobody reaching for a weapon. But nobody relaxing either.

This is a saloon moment.

The boys are already at the table in my mind. Confident. Smart. Quick. Certain of their numbers. Certain of their strategy. Certain they can talk this through in a way that lands where they want it to land. I can almost hear the cadence of it already. The reasoned tone. The reassurance. The carefully phrased invitation to see this new arrangement as a breakthrough rather than a retreat.

And that is part of what troubles me most.

Because what they will likely present as opportunity feels, in my body, like reduction. What they may frame as progress feels, in my chest, like being gently set aside from the very things I care about most while being kept for the things I care about least. My optics. My visibility. My name. My credibility on the website. The image of gravitas I lend to the room.

Kept for the window. Released from the workshop.

This is not a story about villains. These are not bad men. They are younger men with massive ambition and real brilliance in operations, investing, and development. They are fast. They are sharp. They build. They scale. They see angles. They see leverage. They see growth curves. What they have not yet acquired is wisdom. Not intelligence. Not competence. Soul wisdom. The kind that teaches you what to do with power once you have it. The kind that teaches you how to treat people when outcomes matter to real human lives and not just to projections and valuations.

They treat people well on the surface. Professional. Polite. Strategic. They know how to sound supportive. They know how to reassure. They know how to speak in ways that feel relational. But underneath that polish is a pattern that has grown increasingly hard to ignore. Decisions made without including those who will be held responsible for the outcomes. Public correction where private conversation should have come first. Silence where acknowledgment should live. Praise for optics. Neglect for substance.

I occupy a strange seat at their table. I am valued for what I produce. My teaching. My writing. My model. My credibility. I am useful. I am presentable. I look good in the window. I add gravity to the room. I extend the brand. But usefulness is not the same thing as respect. And being displayed is not the same thing as being trusted.

There is a particular dissonance in realizing that what you treasure most in your work is exactly what is quietly being taken out of your hands. The shaping. The shepherding. The training. The authority to protect what you are accountable for. That is what I care about. That is what gives the work its moral weight. And that is precisely what now feels negotiable to them.

They may believe they are offering me a gift. A new deal. A reframing. A lighter load. But what lands in me is something closer to being managed out of the soul of the work while remaining just close enough to keep the branding intact.

I can be quoted and sidelined in the same breath. Promoted in appearance and minimized in authority. That contradiction wears on a person in ways that are hard to describe unless you have lived inside it.

This is where the philosophical knot tightens.

Aristotle ruined all our favorite extremes. He insisted that virtue lives in the uncomfortable tension between too much and too little. Too little humility and you become arrogant. Too much humility and you disappear. Strength without humility becomes tyranny. Humility without strength becomes self-erasure. The virtue is not in choosing one side. It is in living awake in the tension between them.

So where exactly does humility end and self-respect begin.

That question is no longer abstract for me. I genuinely wrestle with it. I have never been a suck up. I have never followed the status quo just to keep peace. I have never been comfortable being minimized or silenced. I have never been particularly good at shrinking. And at this stage of my life, with decades of clinical work behind me, with losses that carved me and skills that cost me, something in me quietly but firmly revolts at the idea that my best role now is to smile politely and be grateful for whatever portion is handed back.

There is a long history in me that does not show up on websites or in resumes. Years of sitting with people in terror and despair. Years of being blamed and misunderstood along with being trusted and invited. Years of responsibility carried quietly when no one was watching. That kind of history reshapes what you can tolerate. It changes the texture of your patience.

I also hear the voices around me. Stay. Lean in. Be patient. Give them time. I understand that counsel. I respect the heart behind it. There is love in those words. There is hope in them. There is also fear in them. Fear of conflict. Fear of loss. Fear of what might happen if I finally stop accommodating what keeps wounding me.

But there is another voice that will not stay quiet. The one that says patience is not passivity. And humility is not disappearance. The one that says you do not prove your character by enduring what violates it.

There is also a particular madness that comes from being responsible for outcomes while being excluded from decisions. Accountable without authority. Visible without being consulted. Blamed without being included. Asked to steward without being allowed to shape. That arrangement unravels people slowly. It twists the nervous system. It erodes trust in small daily increments until the person you used to be begins to feel distant and unfamiliar.

That is not leadership. That is liability dressed up as partnership.

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So tonight I sit in the smoke and wait for the meeting. I do not plan to posture. I do not plan to perform. I do not plan to dominate the room or defend my honor with theatrics. I plan to listen. To observe not just what is said but what is avoided. To notice the pauses. The deflections. The careful language. To watch how the power moves beneath the words. To feel whether I am being invited into true partnership or gently negotiated into a decorative role.

And then I will decide whether anything resembling mutual respect can still be restored or whether I am simply being asked to shrink with dignity.

That is the real decision in front of me. Not whether I am needed. I am. Not whether my work has value. It does. The question is whether I am being invited as a craftsman of the work or curated as a symbol of it.

I do not crave special treatment. I do crave basic dignity. I do not need to dominate rooms. I do need to be treated like a peer rather than a prop. That line no longer feels blurry to me.

Perhaps that is the real tension of this season. Not conflict with others. But reckoning with myself. At what point does staying become a violation of my own values. At what point does endurance quietly turn into self-betrayal. At what point does loyalty to others steadily replace loyalty to my own integrity.

Those questions have weight. They do not resolve quickly. They sit heavy on the chest in the hours before sleep and follow you into the morning.

The boys will bring their proposal to the table soon. They will believe they are being fair. They will believe they are being generous. They will believe they are being reasonable.

And I will have to decide whether clever is enough.

The smoke is hanging in the air now. The glasses have gone still. The murmurs have softened. The room waits.

So do I.