

# A Simple Question

by James Pearce

The construction site hummed with afternoon activity, cranes swinging overhead and the distant sound of welding torches crackling in the summer heat. Jake crouched beside the steel beam, running his fingers along its surface, his weathered hands tracing the metal like a doctor examining a patient. "Mike, get your ass over here and check this out."

Mike walked over, hard hat tilted back, wiping sweat from his forehead with a work-stained sleeve. "What's got you all worked up now, you old bastard?"

"These lines here," Jake pointed to hairline cracks along the beam's flange. "Look at the pattern. That's stress fractures, brother."

Mike squatted down, squinting at the metal. "Christ, Jake, you're giving my balls stress fractures with all your worrying. These are barely visible - hell, I'm impressed an old fart like you can even see them."

"Very funny, asshole." Jake grinned and traced the crack with his finger. "But this beam's telling us it's working too hard. Dynamic loads, thermal cycles, vibration—this metal's getting tired."

"Jake, the safety margin on these I-beams is massive. We could lose thirty percent strength and still be golden." Mike stood up, clapping Jake on the shoulder. "Besides, the specs say surface cracks under a quarter inch are acceptable."

"Specs written by pencil pushers who've never gotten their hands dirty." Jake shook his head. "Look, when some soccer mom with her kids drives over this bridge, you want these cracks to be the reason they end up in the river?"

Mike was quiet for a moment, his expression turning serious. "Shit, when you put it like that... But honestly, Jake, I think you might be overthinking this one. The load calculations check out. The computer models show we're solid."

"And I think this beam needs to be replaced."

They stared at each other, neither backing down.

"Well this sounds like it's above my pay grade," Mike said finally. "This should be a simple question for the engineers. Let's take it to Sarah and David. They can sort out whether we replace the flange or not."

Jake nodded. "Yeah, let the smart kids figure it out."

\* \* \*

Sarah looked up from her CAD workstation as Jake and Mike entered the air-conditioned site office trailer. Multiple monitors displayed structural models, and a coffee machine hummed in the corner.

"What can I do for you guys?" she asked.

David rolled his chair over. "Let me guess—another 'urgent' field modification?"

"We've got stress fractures along beam 7-Alpha," Jake said. "Hairline cracks along the flange."

Sarah frowned, pulling up beam specifications. "That's concerning. Let me run the numbers." Her fingers flew across the keyboard. "According to my finite element analysis, we're at 2.1 times required load capacity."

"That's wrong," David said. "I ran those same calculations yesterday. We're at 2.7 times capacity, well above the accepted tolerance of 2.5."

Sarah turned to face him. "Dave, what load parameters did you use? Because I'm getting different results."

"Standard traffic loads, thermal expansion coefficients, wind shear values from the specs."

"Which specs?" Sarah pulled up another screen. "Because the updated environmental data shows higher wind loads than originally specified. Plus your beam connection model doesn't account for the stress concentrations at the welds."

David crossed his arms. "My model accounts for everything it needs to. The beam meets code."

"But my calculations suggest it doesn't," Sarah said. "With the actual field conditions and the stress fractures you're seeing, we could be looking at failure. We should do some field testing."

"Field testing costs fifty grand," David said. "For what? To confirm my calculations are right?"

"Or to confirm mine are right," Sarah countered.

"Look," David said with an exhausted sigh, rubbing his temples, "this is exactly the kind of decision that's above our pay grade. Let Tom and Lisa figure out whether they want to trust the calculations or burn fifty grand on field testing."

Sarah waved her hands. "Yeah, whatever. This should be a simple question for them - they can decide which calculation to trust."

\* \* \*

The corporate conference room felt sterile compared to the construction site, all cheap laminate furniture and flickering fluorescent lighting. Tom sat at the head of the plastic conference table, his reading glasses perched on his nose as he reviewed the quarterly budget report. Lisa tapped away on her tablet, occasionally glancing at her phone. The

weekly status meeting was dragging on, with various department leads droning through their updates, their voices competing with the soft hum of the air conditioning.

Tom's phone buzzed. He glanced at the email from David, then at Lisa, who had the email already open on her tablet. Their eyes met briefly, and Tom cleared his throat.

"Before we move to the next agenda item," Tom said, removing his glasses, "I see we've received an interesting email from David, our chief engineer on the Straton Bridge project, about some... modeling disagreements between our engineers."

Lisa looked up, caught off guard. "Oh yes, the modeling situation. I was just reviewing it. This seems like a straightforward software implementation issue to resolve."

Tom shook his head. "I disagree. This kind of technology failure could easily put us behind schedule and over budget."

Lisa shook her head. "Tom, it's not clear that any of that is necessary. Our structural modeling platform should be able to resolve these analytical discrepancies without expensive field testing or schedule delays."

Tom leaned back in his chair, a sardonic smile crossing his face. "Oh, really? And why exactly isn't it clear, Lisa? Because last I checked, we just invested ten million dollars in your precious 'structural modeling platform' that was supposed to 'streamline our antiquated decision processes'."

"The technology is working as designed—"

"Is it?" Tom interrupted, "because from where I'm sitting, it seems like your miracle AI is telling us two completely different things and now even our own engineers can't agree on basic structural analysis. Sounds to me like I was right all along about relying too heavily on unproven technology."

Lisa's jaw tightened. "Tom, I think you're being a bit hasty here. The discrepancy is simply a matter of input parameters and modeling assumptions—"

"Exactly my point!" Tom slammed his hand on the table. "We've got a ten-million-dollar system that can't even agree with itself. Meanwhile, I've been saying for months that we need to stick with proven methodologies and proper field verification protocols."

"Oh, that's rich coming from you, Tom!" Lisa's face now flush red. "If your precious 'proven methodologies' were so damn effective, then why are all your projects running six months behind schedule and thirty percent over budget? Why do you think they pulled me out of Seattle to babysit your operation?"

Tom's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Babysit? Is that what you think you're doing here?"

"What else would you call it?" Lisa shot back, her voice rising. "I was running a two-billion-dollar infrastructure portfolio on the West Coast, and they dragged me here to clean up your mess. Your 'proven protocols' are exactly why this company was hemorrhaging money before I arrived."

"My mess?" Tom stood up, his chair scraping against the floor. "I've been delivering

projects for thirty years while you were still in diapers. Every single methodology I use has been battle-tested in the real world, not some theoretical MBA classroom."

Lisa stood up as well, her voice turning ice cold. "You know what, Tom? I'm done with this. I'm escalating this to Charles. Let's see what the VP of Infrastructure thinks about your 'battle-tested' methods when they're putting us behind schedule."

Tom's face darkened. "Oh, you want to play that game? Fine. I'll be having a conversation with Roy about how your fancy technology initiatives are costing us millions and creating more problems than they solve."

Everyone else in the room sat in uncomfortable silence, pretending to study their laptops while the two PMs glared at each other across the conference table.

"This should be a simple question for the VPs to sort out," Lisa said through gritted teeth. "They can decide whether we stick with proven methods or embrace new technology."

"Couldn't agree more," Tom replied coldly.

\* \* \*

The executive floor of the downtown office stretched across the entire forty-second story, floor-to-ceiling windows offering a commanding view of the city skyline. The polished marble floors reflected the afternoon sun streaming through the glass, casting long shadows across the pristine workspace.

Charles burst out of his corner office, his face flushed crimson, nearly colliding with his secretary who stumbled backward in her designer heels, clutching a stack of reports to her chest. But Charles was already striding down the expansive floor toward the opposite corner office, where Roy had emerged and was already shouting across the distance between them.

"Charles! Since when does Infrastructure get to override Operations decisions?" Roy's voice echoed off the high ceilings. "You and your MBA preschoolers are going to be the death of this company!"

Charles stopped mid-stride, his face turning an even deeper shade of red. "Override? OVERRIDE?" His voice cracked with indignation as it echoed across the marble expanse. "There's nothing to override, Roy! This is an Infrastructure decision, pure and simple. Your Operations team doesn't get a vote in how we design and build our projects!"

Roy stormed toward Charles, his Italian loafers clicking sharply against the marble. "The hell we don't! When your 'designs' put us over budget and slow us down, that becomes an operations issue!"

Charles closed the remaining distance between them. "Behind schedule!? Oh, that's rich coming from you, Roy," he said, shoving a finger into Roy's chest. "Your people are a bunch of Neanderthals stuck in the last ice age! The fucking glacier moves faster than

your division! We're building for the future, and you're stuck in the past!"

"Future? What future?" Roy exclaimed, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "Your so-called 'future' is bleeding us dry with over-engineered solutions that fall apart in the real world!"

Charles's face turned purple with rage. "You know what, Roy!?" Charles screamed, spittle flying from his mouth and landing on Roy's cheek. "The Board is sick of your incompetence! They told me in confidence last month they're ready to clean house in Operations!"

Roy moved in closer, inches from Charles's face. "The Board? THE BOARD?" His voice cracked with fury. "The Board pulled me aside after the quarterly review asking when I'm going to recommend replacing you! They said Infrastructure is a money pit and they want someone who can actually deliver!"

"That's a goddamn lie!" Charles roared, pressing closer until their foreheads were nearly touching.

"Is it?" Roy screamed back, his voice echoing off the marble walls, saliva splattering across Charles's glasses. "They said your 'visionary thinking' is bankrupting us and they need someone with operational sense!"

"Is that so?" Charles bellowed, his face now such a deep purple it looked like it might explode. "Let's take it to the Board then!"

The executive floor froze in stunned silence. Dozens of employees peered cautiously from their cubicles, some half-rising from their chairs, others peeking around partitions, all transfixed by the explosive confrontation between the two VPs. The air crackled with palpable tension, a suffocating pressure that seemed to mute even the hum of the HVAC system. Every word, every gesture hung suspended in the charged atmosphere.

Roy barked out a laugh, flecks of spit still visible on his lips. "Oh, please do! I can't wait to hear the Board's thoughts on how your division has been bleeding us dry"

"This should be a simple question for the Board to sort out," Charles said, his voice dripping with venom. "They can decide which one of us they want running things."

"Couldn't agree more," Roy shot back, his eyes blazing with fury.

\* \* \*

The mahogany table stretched the length of the boardroom. The walls were lined with portraits of company founders and industry titans. Twenty-four leather chairs surrounded the massive conference table, each occupied by a board member clutching tablets, phones, and thick portfolios. The late afternoon sun streamed through floor-to-ceiling windows, casting long shadows across the polished surface.

Robert rapped his gavel twice. "We need to address the Charles-Roy leadership conflict before it becomes a public relations nightmare. It's only a matter of time before one of

them starts leaking information to the press to sour the other's reputation."

"The way I see it," said Harrison, adjusting his gold cufflinks, "Charles has better optics with Wall Street. The analysts love his innovation narrative. Our stock is already up 10 points since I brought him on."

"That's ridiculous," snapped Marcus from across the table. "Roy's the safer bet. Institutional investors trust his track record. The stocks up because the markets rallied, not because of Charles' 'innovation narrative'." he said making air quotes.

Harrison scoffed. "Wall Street wants growth stories, not the same old operational playbook. Charles sells the vision they want to hear."

Board member James leaned forward. "I'm with Marcus on this one. Vision doesn't move stock prices, Harrison. Roy's quarterly numbers do."

"Of course you are, James," Harrison said. "That's why you're here, isn't it?"

Robert tried to restore order. "Let's focus on market perception—"

"Look, Roy's numbers are boring as hell," Sarah interrupted. "Charles gives us something exciting to pitch to the analysts. The guy's got charisma."

Marcus leaned back with a smirk. "You mean Charles is friendly to your bank account. What was it, Sarah - two hundred thousand to your foundation last year?"

"Only you, Marcus, would twist philanthropy into corruption," Harrison shot back. "Charles has the public image Wall Street wants. Roy looks like yesterday's news."

"This isn't about optics or vision, Harrison," Marcus snapped, slamming his hand on the table. "We all know why you're pushing so hard for Charles. He's your brother-in-law, for Christ's sake!"

Harrison stood up, his chair scraping loudly against the floor. "I resent that implication! Charles earned his position—"

"Earned it?" Marcus interrupted with a bitter laugh. "The only thing he earned was a spot in your sister's bed! Stop pretending this is about what's best for the company!"

Harrison's eyes narrowed as he leaned across the table. "And what about you, Marcus? Don't think we don't know about your little arrangement with Roy. He's the primary investor in your solar panel company, isn't he? How much of your start-up does he own? Thirty percent? Forty?"

Marcus's face went pale. "That's completely irrelevant to this discussion!"

"Irrelevant?" Harrison barked a harsh laugh. "You're sitting here pushing Roy's agenda while he bankrolls your startup. At least I'm honest about my connection to Charles. You're just Roy's lapdog protecting your investment."

Marcus's hands clenched into fists. "You're out of line, Harrison!"

"Am I? Or am I the only one calling out your blatant self-interest?"

The room descended into chaos, voices clashing as alliances formed and fractured. Board members leaned across the table, fingers jabbing the air to emphasize their points.

Robert slammed his gavel repeatedly, the sharp cracks cutting through the din. "Enough! We're taking a formal vote."

Hands rose around the table, each movement accompanied by glares and muttered curses. The tension was palpable as Robert tallied the results.

"Twelve votes to retain Charles and remove Roy," he announced, his voice heavy. "Twelve votes to retain Roy and remove Charles. We're deadlocked."

A heavy silence fell over the room. Harrison's face darkened, his jaw working as he processed the stalemate. "Then we'll take it to George, he's the deciding vote."

Marcus leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. "Fine. We'll take it to George."

The air seemed to leave the room. Sarah's hand flew to her mouth. "George? Are we really going to involve him?"

Robert shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Gentlemen, George doesn't appreciate being dragged into these matters."

Harrison's jaw tightened. "If that's what it takes. George will recognize Charles's value."

"George will see Charles for the liability he is," Marcus countered, though his voice lacked its earlier conviction.

"And who's going to take the question to him?" Robert asked.

"I'll do it," Harrison said, a bead of sweat forming at his temple. "I'll take the question to George."

"We'll both go," Marcus said, his voice unsteady. He wiped his palms on his trousers. "It should be a simple question for George - well see who he trusts more."

\* \* \*

Harrison and Marcus sat in the plush leather chairs of George's reception area, the silence between them thick with tension. Harrison tapped his foot rhythmically against the marble floor, while Marcus flipped through the same magazine page for the third time, his eyes never actually reading the words.

The antique clock on the wall ticked loudly, each second stretching into an eternity. Harrison checked his watch for what felt like the hundredth time, his fingers drumming nervously on the armrest. Marcus adjusted his tie, then immediately loosened it again, his breathing shallow.

The assistant's phone buzzed, and both men stiffened. She nodded politely and stood. "George will see you now," she said, gesturing toward the imposing oak doors.

Harrison and Marcus rose simultaneously, their movements stiff and mechanical. They exchanged a brief, wary glance before stepping forward in unison. The assistant opened the doors, and they entered together, their footsteps echoing in the cavernous office.

The office was magnificent, with mahogany panels reaching to the vaulted ceiling and

crystal chandeliers casting warm light across Persian rugs. But the air carried an unusual smell - earthy, pungent, animal-like. Harrison wrinkled his nose as they stepped deeper into the room.

In the center of the room, atop the ornate Persian rug, a chimpanzee squatted in a most undignified pose. With a soft plop, the creature finished and rose, turning to face them with a grin that stretched its lips wide, revealing yellowed teeth and pink gums in a disturbingly human-like expression.

"Apologies for the interruption, sir. We didn't mean to disturb you in the middle of your business," Harrison stammered, his voice wavering as he averted his gaze from the chimpanzee's unsettling grin.

Marcus stepped forward, his chin held high. "George, sir, I don't believe we've had the pleasure of meeting formally. I'm Marcus Whitaker, board member." He extended his hand.

Before Marcus could react, the chimpanzee scooped up its fresh deposit and hurled it with surprising accuracy. The projectile splattered across Marcus' chest, flecks of brown staining his crisp white shirt and silk tie. A particularly large glob landed on his lips, and Marcus instinctively licked it away.

"Thank you, sir," Marcus said, his voice trembling with a mixture of fear and reverence. He bowed slightly, his hands clasped in front of him. "Your wisdom is appreciated."

The chimpanzee let out a series of high-pitched hoots, its arms flailing wildly as it began to jump up and down in delight. The creature's movements shook the ornate chandelier above, sending shards of light dancing across the room. Its bare feet slapped against the Persian rug with each bounce, the sound echoing through the cavernous office.

Harrison stepped forward, clearing his throat. "George, sir, if I may bring a matter to your attention. It's a simple matter really, concerning the balance between Infrastructure and Operations..."

As Harrison began his explanation, the chimpanzee started making rapid hand gestures, its fingers moving to his mouth signing for food. Harrison paused, his brow furrowing in confusion. The chimp's gestures became more insistent.

"Oh, um..." Harrison stammered, his confidence faltering. He turned to Marcus, his voice rising in panic. "Did you bring the treats? You were supposed to bring the treats!"

Marcus shook his head, his face pale. "Treats? No one told me-"

"You idiot!" Harrison hissed, his hands clenching into fists. "How could you forget the treats?"

The chimpanzee's hoots grew louder and more aggressive, its chest puffing out as it began to pace back and forth. Its movements became jerky and erratic, its eyes darting between the two men with increasing agitation. The creature's nostrils flared, and it began to slap the floor with its palms, the sound echoing through the office like gunshots.

Harrison turned to Marcus, his face red with anger. "This is your fault! You were



supposed to handle the treats!”

Marcus’s eyes widened in disbelief. “My fault? You’re the one who set up this meeting! You should have prepared properly!”

The chimpanzee’s screams grew deafening, its face contorted in rage. It leapt onto the window blinds, swinging wildly from one side to the other. The metal blinds clattered and bent under its weight as it propelled itself across the room. With a crash, the chimp knocked over an antique floor lamp, sending it tumbling to the ground in a shower of glass and sparks.

Harrison and Marcus both ducked, shielding their faces from the flying debris. The chimpanzee landed heavily on the desk, scattering papers and sending a crystal paperweight rolling off the edge. It pounded its fists against the polished wood surface, its screams now ear-splitting as it glared at the two men with wild, furious eyes.

Harrison raised his hands in a placating gesture, his voice trembling. “George, sir, please! I can fix this! I’ll come right back with your treats!” He mimicked the chimp’s gesture, bringing his fingers to his mouth repeatedly. “Right away, sir! I promise!”

Before Harrison could take a single step, the chimpanzee launched itself from the desk with a guttural scream. It landed on Harrison with the full force of its weight, sending them both crashing to the floor. Harrison’s head struck the marble with a dull thud, his arms flailing wildly as he tried to protect himself.

The chimp grabbed Harrison’s shoulders and shook him violently, its powerful hands gripping tight. Harrison cried out in pain and fear, his hands desperately trying to push the enraged creature away. The chimpanzee’s face was inches from his, its hot breath and angry hoots filling Harrison’s ears as it continued to shake and jostle him.

Marcus stood frozen for a moment, his face pale white decorated with his boss’s excrement. Then, slowly, he began to back away, his eyes fixed on the chaotic scene before him. He reached the office doors and fumbled with the handle, his hands slick with sweat. As Harrison’s panicked shouts and the chimpanzee’s aggressive hoots filled the room, Marcus slipped through the doors and closed them quietly behind him.

Through the heavy oak doors, Marcus could hear the sounds gradually subside. Harrison’s desperate pleas growing weaker before finally ceasing altogether. When silence finally fell, thick and ominous, Marcus pulled out his phone with trembling fingers and dialed Robert’s number.

“It’s done,” Marcus whispered into the phone, his voice barely audible. “George has made his choice.” He paused, swallowing hard as he glanced back at the closed doors. “He chose me.”

\* \* \*

Jake and Mike sat on a stack of steel beams, unwrapping their sandwiches as the

sounds of construction echoed around them - the clang of hammers, the whir of cranes, and the distant rumble of concrete mixers. The smell of fresh asphalt and welding fumes mingled with the aroma of their lunches. Just as Jake was about to take his first bite, David appeared, his hard hat slightly askew and a stack of blueprints clutched in his hand.

“Hey guys,” David said, his voice carrying an unusual edge. “Just wanted to let you know there’s been a reorg. We’re scrapping the models you’ve been using. Going straight to field testing.”

Jake and Mike exchanged puzzled glances. “What’s going on?” Jake asked.

“The modeling controversy?” David said, annoyed. “Come on guys, the executive team has made their decision about our computational approach—it was escalated all the way to the top—we need to move on this fast.”

Mike looked over at Jake, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, we replaced that flange over a week ago,” he said. “The new weld is holding up just fine. We’ve been monitoring it daily.”

David’s eyes widened slightly, and he shuffled the papers in his hands. “Oh,” he said, his voice faltering. “I... I didn’t realize that.” He glanced down at his documents, then back at the two men. “Well, uh... I’ll just...” He gestured vaguely toward the office trailer he came from, his face flushing with embarrassment. Without another word, David turned and walked away.

Jake and Mike watched him go and then continued to eat their sandwiches. Jake took a bite of his sandwich, chewing thoughtfully. “You know, Mike,” he said after a moment, “sometimes I wonder who’s actually steering this ship.”

Mike chuckled, taking a swig from his thermos. “Maybe the problem is that there’s too many folks trying to steer and not enough looking at the map.” He shook his head. “And we just patch the holes so it stays afloat.”

Jake grinned. “Ain’t that the truth.”