



PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

Osiris, he loves his Quarterly Performance Reviews. Gives him the chance to cut you down to size without dropping his smile. And it's all in open forum too – all us gods get cut down to size in front of all us gods.

Thoth gets it in the neck first. 'Have we been falling a bit short on those pesky statutory targets?' asks Osiris in the nicest possible way. 'Hell, long way short, if we're honest with ourselves.' The rest of the guys look at the ceiling. Nice ceiling, all gold leaf. Paid for by the new charges for the Journey to the Afterlife. But that's another story.

Thoth makes the basic mistake again. Never learns. How long we been doing this? Three thousand years? Quarter in, quarter out, he tries an excuse. The 'special project' excuse. Here it goes:

'But Osiris,' he mutters, 'you had me doing that special project, you know, the one to catalogue all wisdom and get it set down on papyrus.'

The guys roll their eyes. Sometimes it's difficult to tell. Most of us you only get to see the heads sideways on at meetings. So the guys roll their visible eye. You got to suppose the other one's doing much the same, I reckon. I don't got no eyes, just that beetle for a face. Bit of a problem with the ladies, if I'm honest. But, hey: comes with the territory.

'Sure thing, Thoth, my old buddy,' says Osiris. 'I was coming on to that later. But since you mention it – how's the project going?'

Thoth murmurs something.

Osiris smiles, winks across the table at Isis who's taking minutes. 'Isis, love – what's the stats on Thoth's project?'

Isis opens up a scroll and pretends to examine it carefully. You can be sure she knows every stat by heart. Here she goes, right on cue - makes a pantomime of looking surprised and confused. 'Says here that the target was seven thousand scrolls by quarter-end. Auditors could only find 4,619, as of – let me see – oh my goodness: last week.'

Osiris raises his painted eyebrows. Fine piece of work those eyebrows. No expense spared. Unguents made from myrrh, colour from lapis lazuli, all the good stuff imported from god knows where. Crushed scarab beetles too, for a deep red on the skin around. Not even my scarab-beetles. Oh no: they got to be imported from Mesopotamia. Real fancy scarab beetles. Can't get them here in Egypt, and not for want of trying. Got them here, I'd be flavour of the month, no doubt about it.

'So, Thoth, buddy, all your statutory targets not being met because – let me get this straight, now – because your special project was slipping. Let me know if I got that wrong, won't you?'

Thoth says nothing. He nods lifelessly.

'How about you, Sekhmet?' says Osiris, suddenly shifting his attack. It's a kind of management-style, I suppose. Hit them with shit from any direction.

Sekhmet's a bit more savvy. 'Reckon I've done my bit for Vengeance this quarter,' she says, giving the rest of us the evil eye. She got to get rid of that lioness mask she wears. Does nothing for her, you know? 'Performance target of six K cases, inclusive of two-point-seven K deaths. Vengeance exacted by cursing – that's up 18 percentage points over last quarter, as per the Corporate Service Plan.'

Osiris whistles. 'Nice work, Sekhmet. Very nice. You got something for us, Isis, my love?'

Isis has something for us. Course she has. She has a great pile of scrolls. 'H'm, can't see anything,' she says. 'Oh, hold up – now what's this one? Special project to wreak revenge on Farmers Guild, for non-payment of tributes at the temples. Seems to have got off the ground in ten districts, but not in another seven. Must be a mistake, I suppose?' You can just about see the poison dripping from her smile.

Osiris shows his teeth, grinning at his wife. ‘Sekhmet will put us right, I expect.’ He shifts his teeth in the direction of the Goddess of Vengeance.

Sekhmet loses the plot. Big time. Happens to all of us, one time or another.

‘Too many management meetings,’ she says.

Oh shit, oh shit. I wouldn’t have said that. What’s she thinking? Rest of the guys are holding their breath, checking their fingernails. Or claws, or whatever.

Osiris makes a comical expression. Only it isn’t.

‘Too many management meetings, huh?’ he says. ‘Interesting idea. Talk us through that one, doll.’

Sekhmet clears her throat. God help her: she never knows when to give in.

‘Seem to spend more time in meetings, seminars, workshops, preparing stats for the quarterly report – more time here than getting out there, doing stuff,’ she says.

Osiris nods thoughtfully, saying nothing. When the man says nothing, you listen.

Sekhmet at least has the sense to stop there. She sits looking into the distance.

Takes Hapi to break the silence. Not all there, Hapi. Or sometimes too much there – likes to appear as two-in-one sometimes, just for a party-trick. Not today, though.

‘Yep, I’m with Sekhmet on that one,’ says he, ‘Like this last quarter, you know? I couldn’t get round to flooding the Nile, because I had that Performance Indicator report to compile. No flooding, no sowing. Could be bad next quarter. No sowing, no harvest, you know? Starvation, chaos and all that good stuff.’

Osiris nods. ‘Still, a bit of chaos will be good for business in our other teams. What you say, Apep?’

Apep. His bag is war, chaos, that sort of thing. Don’t know how he sleeps at night. But anyway, he looks cheerful – can see his targets exceeded next quarter. Maybe even a bonus at the end of the financial year. He’ll be sure to mention that when his turn comes.

‘So,’ says Osiris, coming back to Hapi. ‘No flood this year, then? That don’t sound too clever. Or am I missing something?’

Hapi put a spin on it. Hell, the man can think on his feet. Part of the job, I suppose – you got to be on the ball to manage the Upper and Lower Niles.

‘No flood, boss,’ he says. ‘But tributes to my temples up 650 percent as a result of the no-show. All the mortals reckon I’m angry with them. Income way over budget. I’m fairly drowning in blood from sacrifices. Store-rooms full to bursting. More gold than I know what to do with. Got myself this new suit made. From India.’

The guys are struck dumb. Osiris gets up, strolls down the table. Feels the cloth, murmurs appreciatively. ‘Nice. Very, very nice indeed. Get that guy’s name to me,’ he says, ‘your tailor.’

He returns to the top of the table, sits back in his seat, relaxes. ‘See, guys? Hapi’s got it in one. More management meetings, the better for us. Sometimes less is more, what you say? Poochie,’ he says, turning to the new guy – that’s our Head of Darkness, ‘Poochie, make a note. More management-meetings next quarter. Set them up. Fill the diaries. Block book the meeting rooms.’

‘I’m already on it, sir,’ says Poochie. Poochie loves this. Arranging meetings, drawing up project-plans, establishing governance structures. Has to be said, the guys don’t mind that much. When Poochie’s arranging meetings, at least he’s not poking his nose into the day-to-day business of Death, Storms, Evil and all that customer-facing stuff.

‘Time presses, guys,’ says Osiris, looking at the gnomon above our heads. ‘Got to move on.’

The guys let off a breath. When he looks at the time, Osiris is thinking about lunch. When he’s thinking about lunch, we’re winding down.

‘So, Khepri,’ he says, pointing at me, ‘how’s the dung-beetle business been doing this quarter?’

Holy shit.

