

## **Banya Leadership**

*Where the Master Is a Servant*

Tomas Casas i Klett

**"N**obody is a general in the *banya*." This seemed to me as a rather un-Russian statement, as we were changing into bathrobes. Two friends, Anton and Alexey, had taken me to a sauna bath in a regular Moscow neighborhood with the promise that it would be a tour into the Russian soul. As if to stress the paradoxical nature of the experience, they quickly added, "But there are masters."

The pig-iron oven had been accumulating heat overnight, and was turned off fully charged at 8:00 a.m. It now supplied the energy needs to provide extreme hotness and wetness across the two story heating room.<sup>1</sup> The heating room, "one of the best" in the city, was the inner sanctum of the bathhouse accessible only from the large shower area with its cool pools and the "cooking" table. The furnishings were clean, but not fancy; this was Moscow working class. Not much had changed there from Soviet times.

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We started the routine. We huddled around a table at the cooling space outside the shower area. Refreshments were served, and snacks brought from home by the *banya* regulars were offered. After half an hour of munching and talking we dispensed with the bathrobes and headed for the shower area. The ultimate destination was the optimally prepared heating room. The temperature—in some places it exceeds 80 degrees Celsius—begins to char the tip of one's hair—if not one's skin—despite the protective headwear. From early morning until lunch we made the short pilgrimage to the sauna proper at regular 30 to 40 minute intervals. During some rounds I managed to stay inside for three minutes, some rounds I skipped, and for others I barely lasted 1 minute. My mind raced and counted every second in the heating room.

Alexey explained the logic of going in and out of the heating room over the course of few hours using the analogy of traditional Chinese tea drinking. One enjoys the taste curve as the leaves are brewed repeatedly—up to seven brews for the prime teas. Fragrance transformation starts with the fresh opening and continues through to enrichment and maturation, which will eventually lead to alleviation. In the process, different tones and components of taste are revealed, just as at the *banya*. The bath's experience curve starts with an outright shock. But when repeated time after time, one's body stops defending itself. The system's response is intense circulation, relaxation, and finally very deep and pleasant exhaustion.

"Nobody issues orders, nobody is stressed." The *Banya* is not just physical; it is about the great conversations that happen between the rounds of wilting and dripping. It is a sense of community, emphasized by the lack of hierarchy. Sure, there are still social classes as there are differences both between and within a bathhouse, but there are no differences among guests that experience it together. "In a Russian *banya* everybody is equal."

After each round of strenuous heat dips we went back to the table and replenished our energy with delicacies like Siberian berry marmalade and amazing wild bee honeys. No alcohol. Everything revolved around stories, whose main condiment was humor. Literally, as when explaining the provenance of the marmalade's ingredients, "We pick bears and shoot berries."

I was told that there are "lots of rules" and everybody respects them. The "no women" rule "allows us to unwind" and "women have their own *banya* section and probably feel the same way in not having us men around." Again, "the first rule is to relax. Nobody is angry and if somebody gets angry he is asked to leave." The *banya* is an institution, self-run by the regulars and their norms. Where was the leadership structure?

Anton had been “cooking.” The horseradish and dry herbs, which he had brought with him, were his main ingredients and lay spread on a table next to the cold pools. He smelled them with care, before smashing them into a concoction that would go into the water that humidified the heating room, lending their aroma to the experience. He had many fronts to manage and the preparation of the herbal potion was just a component of a larger process. He would check—or rather feel—temperature and dryness; make the air circulate in the heating room; and open the vents to let oxygen in at the right time. The master’s manipulations also included the preparation of birch or oak brooms which he would flap or outright clap on our backs as a body massage. The skilled whipping was available to all ten or twelve of us in the heating room. This is probably the highest and the most admired qualification at the *banya*.

Throughout, Anton was alert, as if checking for the vital signs of the guests to ensure that nobody exceeded their physical endurance limits. At the end, the master got a round of applause from the parish as a sign of gratitude and respect.

In Russia, leadership comes in many forms. *Banya* leadership is when the master is a servant.

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## Note

1. Technically speaking the Russian *banya* stands in between the sauna and *hammam* or Turkish bath. Its temperature is set at about 70°C with 80–90% humidity. In a sauna the temperature reaches 100°C but at 15% humidity. In the Islamic *hammam* (not to be confused with the Victorian Turkish bath with its hot dry air), temperatures never rise above 50°C, but humidity is always at 100%.