

***Below are all of my emails to people who have sponsored my days in November. I have only quickly cleaned them up, so I apologize for any poor grammar, repetition, etc... Enjoy! Mark***

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Doug Morris

**Subject:** 11-26th to 30th -2010 - Your Days

Hey Doug,

Well I certainly worked hard for you during your five days!

On the morning of Friday the 26<sup>th</sup>, we had our second staff meeting of the week focused on Farmer's Day. I was still flying high from the staff meeting on Wednesday when my Director had demonstrated massive improvement with respect to several coaching items we had been discussing. He gave a repeat performance on Friday that demonstrated that he is on his way to forming some strong new leadership habits. I was very happy.

In the afternoon on Friday, November 26<sup>th</sup>, I jumped on my motorcycle (I've learnt to ride during my placement), and rode for about an hour and a half south to the town of Bladji. One of the Extension Agents from my office had asked me to help him put on a movie screening for him. I arrived at about 4pm and we scavenged around the town for speakers and an amplifier as the sun started to set. It wasn't looking very good until someone suggested we ask the village 'drinking spot' if we could borrow their sound system. They obliged and cut the speakers down from their ceiling mounts for us. I was still pretty skeptical, however, as their amplifier was an open box that looked like a grade 8 science student's first attempt at a circuit!

To my amazement, the amplifier and speakers worked on the first attempt. I plugged my computer in and opened i-Tunes to test it out. A larger crowd of children and some adults had gathered in the village square to watch the spectacle and we had an amazing moment when the Beatle's Let It Be started blaring from the speakers. The crowd went silent as the sun set and they listened to the music.

Bladji is a village of about 2,000 people that only recently got electricity. This was probably the first time many (all?) of the villagers would have seen a movie projected. We wound up showing half of Disney's A Bug's Life for the children first, then a movie called Emmanuel's Gift about a Ghanaian man with one leg who raised awareness about disability by riding a bike across Ghana, and then Pray The Devil Back To Hell about how a women's movement had helped to stop the civil war in Liberia. The crowd of about 200 people finally began to disperse at around 11pm and I was shown to a room in the house of one of the village elders where I slept for the night.

In the morning of November 27th, I had a quick bucket shower and then I joined my Extension Agent with a farmer's group that he has been working with and whom I had met a couple of times already. We ran an Agriculture As A Business (AAB) meeting about how to create a simple business plan. The AAB curriculum is the major program that Engineers Without Borders is running with the Ministry of Food & Agriculture (MoFA). The meeting went well and I am hopeful that they will start writing out their own plans.

After the meeting, I jumped on my motorcycle and rode back to Kpandai in the sunshine. The road was really bumpy, which made riding a challenge, but also lots of fun. When I got back home, I picked up some lunch on the street and then went back to my place to cleanup before heading down to the office to catch up on some computer work. The rest of the evening was pretty quiet, as I was finally out of gas after an incredible busy week (see my recent 80/20 Crescendo post).

I slept in a bit on Sunday (November 28<sup>th</sup>) before going back to the office to work. In the evening, I went over to Madam Marta's house for dinner with my friend Nhial. She had invited us as a thank you for all of the help we have provided for her. Check out my post on Strong Women Leaders of Kpandai to learn more about Madam Marta and what we've been doing together. On this particular evening, most of our conversation was about a business plan for her new pre-school and how it might one-day expand into a boarding school and then an orphanage.

After dinner, I went home and rested for a while and waited for a call from Madam Francesca, who will be the subject of part 2 of the Strong Women Leaders of Kpandai series of blog posts. Madam Francesca called at around 9:30pm to tell me that here women's group was ready to meet me, so I walked down and joined their meeting. There were about 35 women sitting in a large circle waiting for me. The group originally formed a couple of years ago to help prevent power conflicts when Kpandai first became a separate district. The group includes women from several different tribes and they work together to help sooth tensions and promote peace. Increasingly they have also been looking for opportunities to work together on business opportunities, so after I introduced myself, I spoke a bit about how my MoFA office could help support them in their agriculture related business initiatives.

Monday (November 29<sup>th</sup>) was a pretty quiet day in the office. Midway through the day, I went and checked in with the woodworker who is building the second set of wooden children's blocks for Madam Marta's class. We originally built painted letter blocks that went over really well with her pre-school students. This time around, we are trying a set of blocks in different shapes and sizes to help small children learn basic math concepts.

In the evening, my Peace Corp buddy Nhial and I went to the market to buy ingredients to make spaghetti. Nhial is originally from south Sudan, where we lived in a refugee camp until he was 11 and went to Texas with his Uncle. He arrived in Kpandai at about the same time I did, but he will be here for two years! He's a great guy and we have become good friends. He left for meetings in Kumasi the next morning and he will not return before I leave the district for the last time next week, so this evening was our last time together in Kpandai. We had a great dinner and chat. Nhial is going to continue on with many of the initiatives I started, like the wooden blocks, film screenings, and teaching local leaders project management skills.

Tuesday was a bit of a rough day. We were supposed to have a staff meeting starting at 9am, but we found out that my Director had not left Tamale until that morning and he wouldn't be back in the office until about noon. Staff members disappearing to Tamala, where most of their families are based, is a big performance issue in the office and this was a pretty blatant example of the Director not practicing what he preaches. I was pretty disappointed after his amazing performances the week before. When he did arrive and the meeting began, it was clear that he still remembered all of the coaching points that we had discussed, but he had lost a good deal of his moral authority as a result of his actions.

To make matters worse, we had previously spoken about scheduling a final staff meeting for the following Tuesday so that we could complete our first month's pilot of the Earned Fuel Allowance system, but he allowed the staff to convince him that they needed time off to recover from the Farmer's Day celebration on Friday. I pointed out that I would like a final opportunity to address all of the staff, so it was decided that we would have a short meeting the following morning (Wednesday).

I was frustrated and a bit mad, but I managed to calm myself down. When everyone had left, I closed the door and told my Director that I was disappointed in how the day had gone and I was concerned that the office would not follow through on the Earned Fuel Allowance system, which I believe is a major key to building some accountability and positive momentum in the office. He took the feedback well and he assured me that they would follow through. We then discussed the next tangible steps. In the end, the frustration of the day was worth it, as it highlighted upcoming challenges and provided an opportunity for my Director to deepen his commitment. As a result, I am feeling fairly confident about the odds of the office continuing on the path we have started down after I leave.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabott.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabott.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Doug Cox

**Subject:** 11-25-2010 - Your Day

Hi Doug,

On your day, American Thanksgiving, I got up bright and early to go to the field with one of the Extension Agents (Sorkuu) from my Ministry of Food & Agriculture office. I met him at the office at 6am and jumped on the back of his motorcycle for a two hour ride to his operational area, Jamboi, which is at the far end of the district. The ride is a bumpy one over red dirt roads that are full of potholes and rocks. There are three huge puddles that we have to cross and for the last two I had to take off my shoes and lift up my legs as we plowed through them on the motorcycle.

We finally arrived at where Sorkuu stays in Jamboi and we cleaned up and had a coffee. Then we went to interview one of the candidates for District Best Sorghum Farmer for the upcoming Farmer's Day Celebration. The awards are a pretty big deal and I am on the awards committee, so I took some video of the farmer's fields and asked him as many questions as I could think of.

After that, we went back to Sorkuu's place for a lunch of fufu (pounded yams with soup). In the afternoon, we had to farmer's group meetings to run Engineers Without Borders Agriculture As A Business curriculum. The curriculum consists of a series of ten cards that introduce basic business concepts to farmers groups over the course of ten meetings. The main purpose of my trip that day was to ensure that the program was going to be sustainable even in the far reaches of the district.

We had to wind the second meeting up early so that we could leave for Kpandai. Unfortunately we didn't leave quite early enough and the last half hour of the motorcycle ride was in full darkness, which was a bit scary. When arrived back in Kpandai at about 7pm and I grabbed some food and went home and collapsed.

As for your challenge learn if people know about Thanksgiving here, as luck would have it, I saw my first turkeys at Sorkuu's house in Jamboi. He has been raising them for a few years and he has some pretty good looking birds (see attached). Neither Sorkuu or his two nephews who stay with him had ever heard of Thanksgiving and I told him that families in the United States normally eat turkey as part of their celebration. They asked about the origin of the holiday and I told them about the pilgrims and celebrating the harvest, which totally made sense to them as farmers.

Although most people in Northern Ghana have apparently not heard of Thanksgiving, everybody knows about Christmas. Half of Kpandai town is Muslim and they just celebrated the beginning of their new year the other week and the other half is Christian and is eagerly looking forward to the Christmas holiday. As for me, I will arrive back home on the 18<sup>th</sup> and I will be spending Christmas with my parents in Kamloops.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

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**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Sergio and Stephanie Bertani

**Subject:** 11-24-2010 - Your Day

Hey there Bertanis.

First of all, happy belated birthday Stephanie!

Your birthday was one of the best days in Ghana so far. We had a staff meeting in the morning and I was a bit nervous about it going in. A week earlier, I had some pretty heavy coaching conversations with my Director around a couple of staff meetings that he ran that hadn't gone so well. He is a strong leader, but his worst habits seem to come out at staff meetings. He left town for a meeting right after our coaching conversation and he didn't return until the evening before this meeting, so I didn't get a chance to review our coaching points or discuss an agenda for the next meeting.

As it turns out, my concerns were totally misplaced. He ran an amazing meeting and he changed every single thing we'd talked about during our coaching session. I was stunned and extremely happy!

The meeting ended just before lunch and in the afternoon I jumped on my motorcycle to go to a farmer's group meeting with one of the Extension Agents from my office. My farmer friend Paul, whom I had stayed with on my village stay, was a member of the group we met with. I'd been sharing quite a few ideas with Paul over the past few weeks, but I hadn't been sure if they were sinking in fully until he offered a few contributions to the group discussion that showed that clearly they have been.

That evening, I went for dinner with my EWB coach Erin who was in town for a couple of days this week visiting me. She and I were the only two white people in town, so many people assumed that we were married. I was glad that Erin got to see the amazing meeting in the morning and all of the progress my Director has made. In the afternoon, she collected feedback for me from other people in the office and

in the evening we reviewed it over dinner. It was great to get the feedback and to have a chance to bounce ideas back and forth with her.

Your day was so amazing that I am going to focus on it quite a bit in my weekly blog post that I am planning to put up later tonight, so keep an eye out for it if you want to hear more.

As for your challenge, unfortunately there are no elephant's in the vicinity for me to ride. I believe the only place in Ghana with elephants is Mole national park, which is on the other side of the country.

There's not much in the way of large wildlife in Ghana, which is in stark contrast to Kenya and Tanzania where they have every animal most people associate with Africa. Here there are domesticated animals running around everywhere like goats, sheep, pigs, chickens, guinea fowl, dogs and cows, but the wild animals tend to be little things like lizards and snakes that are hard to get photos of. So I've attached a few animal shots from my trip to Kenya and Tanzania a few years ago.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Doris Tang

**Subject:** 11-23-2010 - Your Day

Hey Doris,

Your day, November 23<sup>rd</sup>, was a great one for me!

It started off with my morning run. My Peace Corp buddy Nhial and I were joined for the last ten minutes or so by a pack of school kids.

On the way to work, I stopped off and chatted with Charles the woodworker, who is currently working on my second set of children's blocks. This set will have different sizes and shapes to help children intuitively learn mathematical concepts.

When I got to the office, there were already quite a few people there, which was unusual. Activity has been picking up lately as we are preparing for the big Farmer's Day celebration on December 3<sup>rd</sup>. I am on the awards committee, which apparently means I am ineligible to become the poultry farmer of the year. I worked a bit on this day to organize and review the nominee's applications with one of our new young National Service Volunteers.

After lunch, I jumped on my motorcycle and rode out to the high school, which is just outside of town, to drop off some movies for the school (I had never driven a motorcycle before coming here and I've been having a tone of fun). I left them Emmanuel's Gift, Pray The Devil Back To Hell, Home, Food Inc., The Commanding Heights, and An Economic History of Ghana. They seemed pretty excited, so I'm confident they will put the movies to good use.

When I returned to the office, my Director had just arrived back from Tamale and he had brought with him my EWB coach Erin Antcliffe, who spent a couple of days with me this week. It was great catching up with her and she brought me a care package that included a bottle of red wine! J

At around 4pm, Erin, Nhial and I walked over to Madam Marta's and I led a meeting on project management for a small group of community leaders. Several of them have project ideas, including an orphanage, community library and several projects to help the disabled in the district, but they have all been waiting for the local government to make the first move. I wanted to give them some tools for progressing things themselves and I think it went pretty well. I left them with a simple project plan template and Nhial volunteered to help anyone who was interested to fill it out (he is going to be here for the next two years).

After the meeting, Erin and I went for rice on the side of the road and then we went to a drinking spot called Chop Better and had a couple of beers.

As for you challenge to participate in something new today that I haven't already... That day was my first time visiting the high school and leading the project management meeting was a first as well, although certainly not the sort of thing that is out of character for me. I'm sad to say that drinks that evening with Erin was the first time I have had two beers in one night in Kpandai and I could actually feel it a bit when I was walking home (they are big beers). I know none of these are earth shatteringly new, but in my defense, I think I've been doing a pretty good job of taking every opportunity to do something new that has come my way and I will certainly keep my eyes open for more opportunities during my final couple of weeks.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

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**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Lynn Kitchen

**Subject:** 11-22-2010 - Your Day

Hey Lynn,

Happy belated birthday! Hope you had a great one yesterday. Sorry I couldn't send this email on your actual birthday, but the internet was down for the entire day!

Despite the lack of internet, your birthday was a really good day for me, although it was not without its challenges. In the morning at work, I had a coaching conversation with our new veterinarian officer Mr. Razak and one of our old vet officers, Zanya. It is a well know elephant in the room that Zanya has a drinking problem. When he is drinking, he is excitable and he rambles on, often just tiring out whoever he is speaking with so that they will give up and leave him alone. Like most alcoholics, he is adept a twisting and turning to avoid responsibility. Yesterday we managed to pin him down and give him some direct tough feedback

At the end of the conversation, I felt good about helping the new vet Razak to start getting a grip on his assignment, but I was skeptical about whether or not Zanya would decide to change. However, later

that afternoon he showed up on time to a meeting that Razak had called with a Livestock group to run them through their first card of EWB's Agriculture As A Business (AAB) curriculum.

Razak did an amazing job with the meeting, which made me feel great about the prospects for AAB's sustainability in the district after I leave. But the most amazing thing was that Zanya was like a new man. He sat attentively and offered his input at several key points. I was amazed and happy that he had chosen to act on our feedback from the morning. It is only a small first step, but that's how all changes start.

During the other parts of the work day, I mostly prepared a Project Management presentation that I'm going to give to a group of community leaders tomorrow night. I have observed that there are many strong people here with amazing ideas, but they lack the tools to turn their ideas into reality, so I decided to arrange this presentation. There will be people there who are interested in building an orphanage, a community library, and starting a program of activities for disabled people in the district. My Peace Corp friend Nhial is going to help people enter their project plans into the computer and I will continue to offer my support when I return home.

In the evening, the group of children that normally show up on Nhial and my doorstep came at about 7:30pm. On this evening, Nhial had the idea of having them plan skits, so they started coming up with their characters and stories. Everyone had a great time and the big performance should be sometime in the next few days.

So it was a satisfying day at work followed by a light hearted and fun evening. J

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Monica Rodgers

**Subject:** 11-21-2010 - Your Day

Hi Monica,

Are you back from your vacation yet? Hopefully you are still on the beach, as I understand that Vancouver has been cold lately.

Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup> was great other than a little incident on my morning run. I've been really lucky when it comes to stomach problems, but this morning troubles suddenly hit me when I was halfway back to my place. I just barely made it back to my outhouse in time, but thankfully I felt much better afterwards. Ah, the joys of Africa!

After showering and getting ready, I walked over to meet with a Livestock farmers group with one of my co-workers, Mr. Razak the veterinarian. I was really excited about the meeting because it was to introduce Engineers Without Border's Agriculture As A Business curriculum to the group to see if they are interested in completing it. One of the main goals for my placement is to make sure that this curriculum is sustainable in the district, and this will hopefully be the first group that is focused on

rearing animals as opposed to growing crops. My friend Madam Marta, who is perhaps the strongest women leader in town, is a member of the group, which is an added bonus.

The meeting started out a bit rocky, as I had expected Mr. Razak to lead the meeting, but he just turned to me. Obviously I hadn't communicated clearly enough with him beforehand, so I had to quickly switch gears and take the lead. It turns out that they group has already been together for almost seven years, which is amazing. They seem well organized and they were so keen to participate in the program that they asked if we could meet next tomorrow and again on Friday!

As I walked back to my place, I was attracted by a group of people singing loudly and dancing in one of the classrooms at a junior high school. I went over to investigate and wound up getting beckoned into what turned out to be a Pentecostal church service. Everyone was excited about my arrival. At one point in the service, I had to get up to introduce myself as a visitor and then they asked me if I had a song that I wanted to lead the church in singing. I couldn't think of any songs they would know and I wasn't keen on singing a solo, so I embarrassedly declined much to their amusement. One of the other visitors chose a song instead and then I was swept up dancing in front of the congregation.

After picking up some lunch, I went down to the office to do some work on my computer. Late in the afternoon, I went and met with my tailor friend Malick so that he could help me buy some fabric in the market. I've sent a request back to my family for them to send me their measurements and I'm going to have Malick and his brother Rawan sew up some Christmas presents for me. Malick was amused at me indecision as we ran from stall to stall trying to find fabrics before the market closed.

I had a pretty quiet evening. The regular pack of children who visit us in the evenings showed up on mine and Nhial's doorstep at around 7:30pm and we played their favorite math-blaster video game for a while. There is a little dancing penguin in the game that never fails to launch them into hysterics.

As for your challenge, I had a pretty good laugh at myself on this day when I was dancing in front of the church and running around the market trying to buy fabrics. I also had a good laugh watching the children imitate the dancing penguin.

It's pretty hard to understand jokes in another culture, but one of the planners from the District Assembly told me a good one the other day. We were talking about statistics after the recent announcement that Ghana has reached middle-income status, which most people over here don't believe and, even if it is true, certainly doesn't apply to northern Ghana. He said: "Statistics are like miniskirts – what they reveal is interesting, but what they conceal is intriguing." We had a good chuckle over that one.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabott.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabott.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott  
**To:** Gary Watson  
**Subject:** 11-20-2010 - Your Day

Hey Gary,

Saturday the 20<sup>th</sup> was a relatively quiet day for me. I slept in a bit and then wandered down to the office to work on my computer. On the way to the office, I stopped in to chat with the woodworker who is helping me with my second set of children's blocks.

This set of blocks is a lot more complicated, as there are numerous shapes and sized. I was happy to learn that Charles had managed to take the two 2"x6" by 16' long mahogany boards that I had bought over to the sawmill to get them ripped down to the sizes we need (2"x4", 2"x2" and 1"x4"). The two boards cost me 24 GHC (~\$20), which is expensive for over here, but a screaming deal cheap compared to buying mahogany back home.

I was introduced to Charles the woodworker though the lumber supplier I completed my original set of children's blocks with a different woodworker, Joseph. Charles is older, more experienced and his English is better, but Joseph is cheaper, enthusiastic, and I feel a bit of loyalty towards him because he helped with the first set. I had been struggling about which one of them to use for the second set of blocks. I wound up making an agreement with Charles that he would take the lead, but that he would work with Joseph. This way both of them will learn how to make the blocks and maybe it will even encourage them to start working together on other projects.

I spent most of the day in the office catching up on work and organizing my 'To Do' list for my remaining couple of weeks in my District. I'm having to prioritize because there's way more that I want to do than there is time remaining.

I was hoping to go out to Nchanchina to catch a rehearsal of traditional dancing in the evening, but I received a call saying that the practice had been cancelled. So I went to the market with my friend Nhial and we bought ingredients to make spaghetti. Nhial wound up doing most of the cooking, as I had a conference call with my EWB chapter back home. The call went pretty well, but it is a bit tough talking to a group of people when the reception is spotty.

Our normal group of neighborhood children showed up on our doorstep at about 7:30pm and Nhial played math games with them on his computer – their favorite! After that, I just quietly read for a bit.

As for letting Sydney know what it's like to be 3 in Ghana, check out the video on my recent Building Blocks of Development blog. It shows Madam Marta's class, which includes many three year olds. I'd say that her students are the lucky kids, as most 3 year olds probably have to follow their mothers to work all day, which I imagine is a lot less interesting than being in a class with 72 other children. Especially now that the class has fancy new wooden blocks! J

Enjoy your vacation. I believe you said that the girls are going to start learning how to ski?  
Hope you are doing well.

Mark  
[www.markwjabott.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabott.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott  
**To:** Chad and Kate Groves  
**Subject:** 11-14th to 19th -2010 - Your Days

Hi Chad and Kate,

Your week was quite a roller coaster for me. I came into the week on a major high from playing football with the children in Nchanchina on Sunday afternoon (I put some video of this on my blog). In sharp contrast, Monday moved at a snail's pace because I was the only person in my office. This was because Tuesday was a national holiday on account of the Muslim celebration of Ada Ida and most of my staff were in Tamale with their families. To make matters worse, it was sweltering hot and the power was out for most of the day, which meant that the ceiling fan wasn't providing any relief. Unfortunately this left me hot and grumpy for most of the day.

The official holiday on Tuesday was pretty relaxing for me. I slept in and then wandered into town to check out the festivities. Kpandai town is almost 50% Muslim and everyone was happy and dressed up in their finest smocks, which was very cool to see. There was booming music all day long and for the rest of the week emanating from several large banks of speakers scattered around the town that a few sets of local boys rent out for special occasions like holidays, weddings, funerals, dance parties, etc... These speakers are LOUD and create a sharp contrast to the normal quiet of the town.

Wednesday I was back in the office, but I was still pretty lonely. A few of our staff wandered in for a bit, but I think it was mostly because they weren't sure if the Director was coming back that day or the next. When they found out he wasn't there, they mostly disappeared pretty quickly. This is pretty typical for our office. It's a bit hard to tell because most of the staff are supposed to be out working in the field, but I'm fairly certain that not much happens in the district when the Director is in Tamale (the northern capital and where most of the staff's families live) for a meeting or on personal business. I spent the majority of Wednesday preparing for a coaching session that I wanted to have soon with my Director to cover such topics as empowering staff and creating increased accountability to address issues like the fact that nobody works when he is away.

During the evening on Wednesday, I met first with Madam Marta and then with Madam Francesca. They are two of the strongest women leaders in Kpandai. They are both primary school teachers and they both lead women's groups. I have been working with both of them on a series of initiatives: wooden blocks for children, screening movies for their women's groups, helping research child labour standards, helping to create a business plan for an orphanage, creating business groups to pursue ideas like selling dried mangos, etc... In my conversations with each of them, we reviewed the status of these initiatives. I also interviewed Madam Francesca to gather material for a blog post I'm working on about Kpandai's Strong Women Leaders.

On Thursday everyone started arriving back for a special staff meeting that the Director had called to prepare for Farmer's Day, which will be on December 3<sup>rd</sup>. Most of the 100,000 people in the district are farmers and Farmer's Day is a big deal. Our office is a bit behind in our preparations, so our Director called the meeting to give it a kick.

Everyone arrived in the morning expecting the meeting to start at 9am, but the Director called and said he would not be there until noon, so everyone sat around for the morning and I added another bullet item to my coaching session notes. When the Director arrived, he was frustrated about the lack of

progress while he was away, which gave me a good opening to start the coaching session. I closed his office door and we spent the lunch hour just before the meeting talking.

I've developed a pretty amazing relationship with him and, since my time in the district is fast running out, I decided to take a risk and hit him with some pretty direct feedback. We covered topics like: leading by example, adopting a more open communication style, creating better accountability in the office, and how to empower team members. I brought up several examples from our last staff meeting, which was the last time I saw him as he had left for Tamale right after it.

When we wrapped up the conversation so we could start the staff meeting, I was feeling great! Director had thanked me for the feedback and I'd really felt like we were on the same page. And then he ran the staff meeting...

It was right back into his old habits. He spoke for about 90% of the time, asked for feedback and then cut people off, scuttled everyone's work schedules because of farmer's day, and answered his cell phone a couple of times in front of everyone after starting the meeting by telling people not to be slaves to their phones. Sigh. I decided to suck back my frustration and call it a day. That evening there was an amazing thunder and lightning storm – the loudest I've ever heard. I got stuck under the awning of a shuddered shop on the main road coming back from picking up dinner and I had to wait it out, but it was an amazing show so it wasn't too bad.

I managed to build up my spirits on Friday morning as I arrived for work and I decided to let the day unfold instead of diving right into feedback about yesterday's meeting. I shared some research with my Director about dry season farming that I had done on the internet while he was away. I'm the only person in the office (and maybe the entire district!) with Internet access so this type of research is a pretty big value-add that I have been able to offer. As we were wrapping up, our Veterinarian Manager Mr. Chanase) came in to get his vacation request signed. Director has had it out for Chanase for the last several months because he thinks that he went above his head to complain about how staff allowances were disbursed. A couple weeks earlier, I had a great one-on-one coaching session with Chanase and we spoke about his difficulties with the Director. As Mr. Chanase was about to leave the office, I suggested that the two of us have a conversation with Director to see if we could start turning things around. We wound up meeting with him for about an hour. It started out pretty heated, but in the end we wrote up a trust-building agreement wherein both Chanase and Director agreed to certain items. They both signed it and agreed that the two of them would continue to meet every month along with the Deputy Director as a facilitator to monitor their progress.

Director seemed to be in a pretty open mood after this conversation, so I decided to jump into discussing yesterday's staff meeting. We reviewed it in light of the items we had discussed during our coaching session and we discussed several specific examples. I delivered my feedback even more bluntly this time and he was once again incredibly open to the feedback, which greatly deepened my already considerable respect for him. We talked about how hard it is to form new habits and he decided that he would try to engage his Deputy Director more so that he would have someone to give him straight feedback after I leave. We also decided that he would start sending me a monthly update after I leave and that we would chat on the phone to review progress and ensure that he continues his progress towards building the new habits we had identified.

The cherry on top came at the end of the day on Friday just as he was about to leave to go back to Tamale for the weekend. I was working away quietly in his office (I share his office with him) and he was

sitting quietly, obviously thinking. Eventually he broke the silence and asked me “If you were Director, what is the one thing you would do.” I have come to know my Director pretty well and I knew instantly from this question that our coaching conversations were taking root.

Thank you so much for sponsoring an entire week! I’m glad to report that it was very successful.

Hope the two of you, Sam and Sarah are all doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Peter Turner

**Subject:** 11-13-2010 - Your Day

Hey Pete,

Happy belated birthday!

As I mentioned before, you share a birthday with my grandmother who passed away earlier this year, so I assigned November 13<sup>th</sup> as your day to sponsor me instead of your actual birthday.

And it was a great Saturday! After sleeping in for a bit and then doing my laundry in a bucket out in front of my place, I got ready and walked to a nearby school to attend a meeting of the Kpandai Association for the Disabled. The group was formed a few years ago, but it has been dormant for the past while. The group has decided to start meeting again after a few of their members attended our screening earlier last week of Emmanuel’s Gift, which is a movie about a Ghanaian man with a crippled leg who rides a bicycle across Ghana to raise awareness about people with disabilities (see my blog post entitled Projecting Change Kpandai – Take 2 for more info on the screening).

The new District Director of Welfare invited me to the meeting, which took place at a junior high school near where I am staying. When I arrived at 10am, I was shocked to find everyone already there, as this is the first time I’ve been to a meeting that started on time in Ghana! There were about 15 people including representatives from some of the other towns in the district.

The leader of the group is a blind man named Mr. James, who seems quite capable. He has some challenges on his hands, as a couple of men started arguing about how quickly to expand programs across the district and other strategy questions. At one point, the two men almost came to blows and one of them stormed off and had to be convinced to return.

After all of the steam was blown off, we settled into a pretty good discussion. They have some clear objectives as a group, but they have not yet developed a program of projects to actually start advancing towards these objectives. In fact, they seemed to be mostly waiting for money to come from the government. I pointed out that they will probably need a good plan before the government will release any money and that having such a plan might help them to attract support from other places. Everyone seemed to like this idea and I agreed to facilitate a brainstorming and planning session in a couple of weeks.

After the meeting, I wandered into town and bought a papaya, some oranges and some fried yams for lunch. In the late afternoon, I walked over to Madam Marta's house with my computer and a projector that I had borrowed from the District Assembly (it's new and the only one in town). I had shown three quarters of the movie Pray The Devil Back To Hell about the women's movement in Liberia to Madam Marta's women's group the previous weekend and on this evening I was to show the remainder of the movie.

I arrived early so I could interview Madam Marta about her experience as a leader in the community before the other women started showing up. It was a fascinating discussion and I'm going to write a blog post about it soon. She has been leading women's groups for the past twenty years and the groups have focused on a wide range of topics: spousal abuse, child labour, women's health, education, etc...

As it turned out, most of the women didn't show up for the movie because they were attending a funeral in town, so we decided to screen the Lion King for all of the children who were loitering around. After putting the word out, we quickly had about 30 or 40 kids jammed into Madam Marta's pre-school for the movie, which predictably they loved.

After the movie, I walked home and there was a different group of about eight children waiting on my doorstep. My Peace Corp friend Nhial brought out his computer and he let them play a children's math game that I had brought from Canada.

As I said, it was a great Sunday. My most recent blog post entitled 'The Building Blocks of Development' includes a picture of the Association of Disabled People's meeting and a picture and video of Madam Marta's pre-school class. I've also attached a picture from our Lion King screening.

Thanks again for sponsoring this day. Hope you are doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Carl and Karen Abbott

**Subject:** 11-12-2010 - Your Day

Hi Mom and Dad,

I thought about Gram a lot on her birthday and I had a chance to speak with Auntie B and Daisy. It helped me a lot in the quiet moments throughout the day to think that she was somehow here with me in Ghana getting to see what I'm doing and enjoying my experiences with me. I hope the day was not too hard for you.

The morning started out very quietly. I was supposed to go to a farmer's group meeting, but the Extension Agent had to go to Tamale on urgent family business, so he was forced to cancel. This left me with time to work quietly on my computer and make calls to try and arrange future trips to the field with Extension Agents.

I had a nice surprise in the mid morning when the Director of Welfare, Mr. Joseph, stopped by the office to tell me that several disabled people had come to the District Assembly to register themselves

following our screening of Emmanuel's Gift earlier in the week. In addition, a few of the members of the previously dormant Kpandai Association of Disabled People had seen the movie and it inspired them to start meeting again. Mr. Joseph invited me to attend their meeting the next day (Saturday), which I was really excited about.

In the late morning, I went to Madam Marta's pre-school class to drop off the wooden blocks that I commissioned for her. I've become more and more excited about this side project as I have learnt about how powerful simple wooden blocks can be for small children's development. I'm just about to put up a post that includes a video of me introducing the blocks to her children, so keep an eye out for it.

In the afternoon, I went with one of the Extension Agents, RB Adams, out to Bladji to attend an Agriculture As A Business meeting with a farmers group. I had been out to Bladji the afternoon before to help arrange the meeting and I'd met a few of the farmers, but this time the whole group was there.

The secretary of the group spoke English well and he seemed like an intelligent man, but he had bloodshot eyes and it turned out he was drunk. He quickly became belligerent and stormed off. The group just shrugged this off.

As the meeting went on, we talked about the logic of the group purchasing inputs together and selling their outputs collectively. At one point I drew a box with arrows in and out of it in the dirt to illustrate inputs and outputs into a process and challenged them to think of alternative sources of inputs and places to sell their output. We talked about ideas like: buying fertilizer and chemicals in bulk to get lower prices, coordinating tractor services to make it easier to attract tractor operators to the region, having backup plans in case promised inputs from the government did not come or were late, how to collect price data from different markets, and how to store their produce to allow them to time the market.

I managed to bond a bit with the group and they gave me 8 yams at the end of the meeting as a thank you, which they tied to the back of my motto. The meeting had gone late and I didn't get going until dusk, which made the ride home a bit of an adventure, as the bugs kept hitting my face (I had my visor up because it was dirty) and I had to go really slow because of the darkness.

By the time I arrived home, I was really tired. Thankfully Nhial had made spaghetti, which I hungrily devoured. Then some children came over and watched the movie Up on my laptop until the power went out, which gave me an excuse to go to bed.

Hope you are doing well.

Love,  
Mark

[www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott  
**To:** Gary Watson and Jennifer Simpson  
**Subject:** 11-11-2010 - Your Day

Hey Gary and Jen,

Like Jen grandfather, mine was also a WWII veteran. He served in North Africa and Italy on the frontlines. He contracted Alzheimers and then died before I was old enough to ask him about his war experiences, but some of his friends filled me in a bit during my trips to Newfoundland. When I was in Ottawa visiting Thias just before coming to Ghana, I stumbled upon a photo of him on the wall in the War Museum. It was quite a shock.

I think being over here has heightened my emotional sensitivity to certain things – in a good way. I've been thinking quite a lot this week about my Grandfather because of Remembrance Day and also about my Grandmother, who's birthday is tomorrow.

World War II was a big turning point for Ghana, as it was for most countries. As part of the British Empire, there were many conscripted Ghanaian troops who returned to Ghana emboldened and with a much broader worldview. This shift in thinking amongst the veterans in combination with England's inability to support its empire in the aftermath of the war set the stage for Ghana to become the first sub-Saharan African country to gain its independence in 1957.

Anyway... After going for a nice run this morning, my day in the office started out very quietly, as my Director and all of the managers are in Tamale for a meeting and the rest of the staff are either out in the field or taking advantage of the lack of supervision to slack off. Our office is getting seven National Service volunteers and a couple of them showed up earlier this week (all College and University grads have to put in a year of service before starting to work). Since there was nobody around to direct them, I've challenged them to come up with a new template for our staff's monthly reports. They had a first draft completed this morning, so I gave them a bit of feedback.

Then one of my Agriculture Extension Agents came to the office, RB Adams. He is about 55 years old and a bit of a blowhard, but a nice enough fellow. I have been bugging all of the AEAs to have an Agriculture As A Business (AAB = EWB's big program) group meeting and invite me. He said that his motorcycle was broken so he couldn't get to his operational area to arrange the meeting with his farmer's group. I said we could take mine, so he jumped on the back and we took off with me driving. J

The roads are in horrible shape and it took us an hour to travel 20km to his operational area. As we were often forced to go slowly in order to pick our way through rocks and around potholes, it provided a pretty good chance to chat and get to know him a bit better.

When we arrived in Bladji, we had a great chat under a mango tree with three of the ten farmers in the AAB group that RB had started in the summer with the previous EWB volunteer. They are collectively growing 10 acres of maize. I asked them about their challenges in the district and they all said the lack of tractor services. We had a great conversation about setting a goal of buying a tractor and we ran some numbers to figure out what size of maize field they would need to achieve their goal. They were really engaged and slowly warmed up to me. Then they invited me to go on a canoe ride on the nearby Oti river, which was a good bit of fun. I had been asking about transporting yams and goods on the river, so they took me in a small canoe to see some of the large transport canoes.

The trip to Bladji took up most of my workday, but it was a really good opportunity to establish a relationship with RB and his farmer's group. It was also a great opportunity to learn more about how best to get farmers to regard agriculture more as a business, which is the core of my work over here along with strengthening the management and leadership of my Ministry of Food & Agriculture office.

I arrived back at the office around 5pm and packed up my stuff. Then I went over to visit Madam Marta, who is an ex-primary school teacher who has just opened up a pre-school in her retirement. We chatted about several things, including when we could continue the movie screening for her church group that we had started last weekend. She's an amazing woman and I'm planning to do a whole post on her soon, so keep an eye out for it.

Now the power has just gone out and I'm sweating buckets in my room as I write this email. I'm tired from the travel and time out in the sun today, but it was a really good day.

Hope all is well with you.

Mark

[www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Lorna Guppy

**Subject:** 11-9th & 10th-2010 - Your Days

Hi Bill and Lorna,

Greetings from Ghana! These days I'm 4 hours ahead of you instead of 4 hours behind.

I think being over here has heightened my emotional sensitivity to certain things – in a good way. I've been thinking quite a lot this week about Grampie because of Remembrance Day, as I know you are. It was also Grams birthday tomorrow (the 12<sup>th</sup>).

On the first of the days that you sponsored, Tuesday, November 9<sup>th</sup>, I started my day off with a run down the red dirt farming road that is my normal route. I often attract groups of school children in uniform who join me for a portion of my run and on this particular morning it was a fairly large group for the last kilometer or so.

My day in the office was pretty quiet, as my Director and all the managers are away in Tamale this week and the rest of the staff are either out in the field or taking advantage of the lack of supervision to slack off. On the bright side, the quietness has allowed me to connect one-on-one with some of the field staff. On this particular day, I had a great conversation with Mr. Kwame, who is one of the more experienced Agricultural Extension Agents (AEAs) in the office. We chatted about strategies of how to form good farmers groups and how to get them thinking about their farms more like businesses.

In the late afternoon, I began setting up for an evening film screening that I worked with some people from the District Assembly to help organize. As the sun started to go down, we blasted Bob Marley songs to attract a crowd. There were some short speeches at around 6:30 and then we started the movie, Emmanuel's Gift, which is about how a Ghanaian man overcame his physical disabilities. I just

put up a full blog post about the movie screening that includes a short video clip of the District Chief Director's opening remarks. You can view it at: [www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com)

On Wednesday I skipped my morning run, as I was tired from all the excitement of the movie screening. As I was walking to work, many people stopped me to comment about how much they had enjoyed the movie. One woman asked me for a copy of it because she wants to show it to her church group.

At work, I caught up on paperwork and continued developing the Earned Fuel Allowance system that I'm helping my Director to implement. Then in the afternoon, I rode my motorcycle south for about half an hour to join one of the AEAs for their first meeting with a new women's group. He is going to run the group through the Engineers Without Border's Agriculture As A Business curriculum that I am helping to implement in the district.

We met under the shade of a mango tree, which is where most community meetings happen over here. The meeting started out a bit rough, as 15 additional women showed up to join the original 15 and there were about 10 men and countless children hovering around in the background. I think it was my presence (an Obruni, or white guy) that attracted the crowd, so I apologized to the AEA after the meeting for causing a disruption.

Despite a rocky start, the group managed to decide to form two groups of 15 each instead of one big group and the original group elected their executive. They also decided to meet every Wednesday, so hopefully I will be able to attend another couple of meetings before I leave. They seem like a conscientious group and the AEA is very reliable, so I have high hopes for their success.

In the evening, I stopped off to chat with Madam Francesca, who is a teacher and one of the biggest female leaders in the community, about a few initiatives that I working on with her on, including connecting her children to Suzanne's class back home. After our chat, I picked up some food on the street and went home for a quiet evening of reading.

I'm having an amazing time over here and I can't believe there is only one month left!

Hope you are doing well.

Love,  
Mark

[www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabbott.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Kyle Robertson

**Subject:** 11-8-2010 - Your Day

Hey Kyle,

I started off your day (November 8<sup>th</sup>) with my semi-regular morning jog. My Peace Corp buddy Nhial has really helped motivate me for these runs. He ran mid distances in College in Texas and he's very quick. His next goal is to run a 75 minute half marathon in Accra next summer. Yikes! On this particular morning, we attracted a small pack of school children who ran the last kilometer or so on our heels.

My day in the office was a pretty quiet one, as my Director and all of the managers are in Tamale for a meeting (check out my last audio blog post for the back story on this). Although this makes it hard to progress management initiatives, it is making it easier to connect with the field staff. On your day I had a really good chat with our veterinarian, Mr. Chanase. It turned into a coaching session about how he has trouble communicating with our Director. At the heart of the matter is the fact that Mr. Chanase is the kind of guy who avoids confrontation while my Director thrives on it. As a result, Mr. Chanase rarely manages to get his point across and is often frustrated, while my Director totally underestimates Mr. Chanase as he perceives him to be weak. Mr. Chanase and I had a great chat about this and we discussed ways in which he could alter his communication approach. He was very appreciative and asked if we could meet again a few times before I leave.

Next I had a good talk with Mr. Kwame, who's one of the strongest Extension Agents in the office. I asked him why EWB's Agriculture As A Business program didn't seem to be getting much interest from the staff. He said that we needed to get staff calendars of activities and monitoring in place first, which was kind of reassuring as that's the conclusion I came to too and what I've been focusing on. He also suggested that we ask farmer groups how often they want to meet instead of dictating meeting schedules to them too, which I think is a great idea.

Finally, my friend Paul who I stayed with on my village stay stopped by the office and we spent a couple of hours doing some simple business planning. I had tried and failed to get him interested in doing a general business plan for his farm previously, so this time we focused on a specific plan to find out what he needs to do to fulfill his goal of going back to finish his final semester of high school (check out my Post Village Stay post if you haven't already). We determined he needs to save 1,000GHC to pay for his school, related expenses and support his family for the four months he is away – a number that really surprised him.

We also determined that he can only farm enough yams and cassava himself to support his family and perhaps make a small bit of profit (a few hundred Cedes), so the only way to reach his goal is to hire labour. He is expecting to have about 370GHC in cash when he is done harvesting his yams and cassava this year. If he invests 300GHC of this in labour for next year, he should be able to earn between 1,000 and 2,000GHC – enough for him to go to school the following year. I'm fairly certain that the 370GHC would have just quietly disappeared if we hadn't have done this calculation. Now that he is more aware, I am hopeful he will invest this money in hiring labour and stick with the plan, but realistically I still only give it 50/50. Hopefully the odds will go up after a few more conversations...

After work, I had a pretty relaxing evening. My friend Nhial and I wound up showing the Pixar movie A Bug's Life to eight neighborhood kids out in front of our place, which was lots of fun.

As for your challenge regarding getting the opinion of Ghanaians about whether or not a defender stopping a ball on the goal line with their hands should be an automatic goal, although Ghanaians are generally happy to talk about football, for some reason nobody seems to want to talk about this particular subject. I agree that working to change this rule could help to lift the hearts of Ghanaians and make the world realize that ancient rules long past their prime can be overturned, but it would seem that the wound is still a bit too fresh. ;-)

I'd better get going now. It's 4pm on Tuesday and I'm screening a movie called Emmanuel's gift at 6pm for several hundred people tonight as part of Projecting Change Kpandai. Keep an eye out for the blog post describing how it goes.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** James McPherson

**Subject:** 11-7-2010 - Your Day

Hey James,

Your next day was a fairly leisurely Sunday. I managed to sleep in despite getting disturbed at 6:30am by a local boy who I barely know knocking on my door asking me for laundry soap. As an Obruini, I get a lot of people asking me for stuff. Part of it is that they assume I have money, but there's also a part of it that's just cultural, as over here there's a much greater expectation of sharing with the community if you are able.

Anyway... I managed to get back to sleep for a couple of more hours. My back is finally getting used to my thin foam mattress and I've given up on finding an actual pillow as I'm also finally getting used to using my rolled up fleece stuffed into the pillowcase that I borrowed from the Intercontinental Hotel in Toronto on my last night there. J

My 'To Do' list for the day consisted almost entirely of catching up on communication with home: sponsor emails, blog posts, and putting the final touches on the new version of my Innovation article. But before I started working, I decided to go for a ride on my motorbike, so I walked down to the office where I keep it locked up in the storeroom at night.

I was having trouble getting it to spark, so I pushed it down to the local motorcycle repair man. He pulled out the sparkplug and rubbed it in the dirt a bit to clean it and then charged me 1 Cedi (a little less than \$1) for his 10 minutes work. I took off out of town feeling free as a bird, but when I stopped after about 5 minutes to take a picture of the new clinic that is about to open, I couldn't get the bike started again.

After playing with it for a while, I finally checked the fuel tank. I had filled it up a few days ago and it should have still been almost full, but I had not locked the fuel cap and someone had obviously drained it. I did finally manage to get it going and I limped back into town for a fill-up. The tank took 3 gallons, which cost 15 Cedis (\$12).

Back on the road again, I took off towards Ekumidi to the west of town. Riding the motorcycle over the bumpy dirt roads is a ton of fun, as is watching the reaction of all the village children who come running out as I ride by. I passed village soccer fields, groups of people lounging under mango trees, women washing clothes in streams, farms... It was wonderful.

I road in basically a big box, coming back on the other side of Kpandai town about an hour and a half later. The ride put me in good spirits, so my communication work went pretty smoothly when I finally settled in at the office. In the evening, Nhial and I picked up some rice, oranges, a coconut, and some fried beans on the street for dinner. We got home and settled in just before a rainstorm started, which

was perfect timing as it cooled off the evening and I like the sound of rain on the metal roof as I'm falling asleep. Kind of like the sound of rain on the skylights in my place. J

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Mark Vuletin

**Subject:** 11-6-2010 - Your Day

Hey Mark,

Your day (Saturday, November 6<sup>th</sup>) started off with a rainstorm, which gave me an excuse to skip my run and sleep in. When I did finally get up, I started to prepare to do my laundry in a bucket in front of my place, but thankfully a couple of local girls whom I know came by and volunteered to do it for me. J

In the late morning, a young boy came running over to let us know that the Seven Day Adventist church service was over and that it was time for me to come and show the movie that we had promised to screen for the church's women's group. I had been talking to the leader of the group, Madam Marta, for the past couple of weeks. She is an amazing leader in the community who is working through her group to combat spousal abuse and child labour.

When I got to the church, I learned that they only had one power socket that was inconveniently placed, so we decided to walk all thirty women over to the pre-school that Madam Marta had just finished constructing adjacent to her house. After hurrying to get organized, I started playing the movie Pray The Devil Back To Hell, which is about how a women's movement in Liberia helped to end the civil war there. It is a really inspiring movie and the women seemed enthralled.

I've shown inspirational movies to several groups over the past couple of months and it's really fun to see how excited people get. If you haven't already, check out my Projecting Change Kpandai post about when I screened this same movie at the Catholic church under a mango tree. There's also a picture in my latest post of me showing it to Madam Marta's group. Tomorrow evening we have the next Projecting Change Kpandai big screening coming up, which I expect will attract over 500 people!

The rest of the day was pretty relaxing. I caught up on some of my emails. My Peace Corp buddy Nhial and I went shopping at the market and then we came home and make spaghetti over a charcoal fire. As usual when we cook, we attracted a bunch of neighborhood kids who all wanted to try the Obruni (foreigner) food.

So your day was a pretty relaxing Saturday. Thanks again for sponsoring it!

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott  
**To:** Catriana McKie  
**Subject:** 11-5-2010 - Your Day

Hey Cat,

Hope you enjoyed the fireworks on Guy Fawkes night! I guess it's a pretty big holiday in England.

I was woken up at 4:30am on November 5<sup>th</sup> by the sound of a loudspeaker from a mosque calling people to prayer. The loudspeaker goes off every morning at about this time, but for some reason it was extra loud on this particular morning.

I couldn't get back to sleep, so I woke up and started working on the new version of my Innovation article. The editor from Innovation wasn't keen on my first version, as she wants a personal story and my first version was more of a sales pitch for EWB. Thankfully the ideas started flowing freely and it was a quiet Friday in the office so I was able to get most of the new version written (I've just submitted the attached final draft today and I'm much happier with it than the previous version).

During the workday, I was also able to catch up on some miscellaneous items like organizing the Projecting Change film screening for next Tuesday (keep an eye out for a post), arranging with an elementary school teacher to exchange questions with my sisters class in Canada, and talking to a local woodsmith about making a set of prototype wooden children's blocks.

The evening was pretty relaxing, as I mostly just chatted with my Peace Corp friend Nhial and then watched Robin Hood on my laptop. Our regular pack of local children showed up for about an hour in the early evening and we had fun entertaining them.

As for your question about the role of cocoa and chocolate in the Ghanaian diet and culture, it doesn't really have much of one, which is pretty strange considering how pivotal it is to their economy as their biggest export. I understand why they don't manufacture too much of it here (temperature issues, access to other ingredients like milk, etc...), but I would have thought they'd find more local uses for it. For example, the Aztecs used to mix it with hot peppers and spice to make drinks.

There is a government push to manufacture more chocolate locally. There is one relatively popular local chocolate bar called Kingsbite, which I have tried, but it's not the greatest quality. I haven't seen any chocolate for sale in Kpandai and I've only seen a bit of it in Tamale, but when I was down in Kumasi visiting Kuapa Kokoo, I did see all sorts of global brand chocolate bars like Mars Bars and Kit Kats. I'm fairly certain they are all imported.

Strangely enough, there seems to be a bigger market for what we'd consider a byproduct of cocoa. Local women often use the cocoa husks to make soap. I haven't had a chance to try it yet, but apparently it is quite good.

As cocoa is to the more affluent south of Ghana, shea butter is to the poorer northern regions. I am currently reading a really interesting book called Shea Republic which is about the shea industry and is focused on Ghana. I'm hoping to visit a shea processing group soon and write a post about it. One of the interesting things that I have learnt is that shea butter can be used as a substitute to cocoa butter in chocolate, but that some cocoa exporting countries try to influence chocolate standards to discourage

the competition. I'm hoping to get some time to research Ghana's stance since it has both. I'm guessing that the politicians would be more concerned about cocoa, as shea comes from the poorer and less populous south. Plus shea trees have not yet been domesticated, so shea butter is not so big business friendly.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabbot.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Kim Law

**Subject:** 11-4-2010 - Your Day

Hey Kim,

Your day (November 4<sup>th</sup>) was a really productive one for me! It started off with my first run since having raised yam mounds on the previous Saturday. My legs aren't recovering as quickly as they used to. Must have something to do with my 35<sup>th</sup> birthday last month...

I started off the workday with a great meeting with our new vet (Razak) and our vet manager (Chanasse). There was a third vet (Zanya) who was supposed to be there, but he flaked out at the last moment. Zanya's a bit of a management challenge, which became one of the topics of our meeting. The new vet Razak seems to be an extremely capable guy, which is great because I get the impression that our veterinarian services have been practically non-existent in recent times. During our meeting, Razak and Chanasse got to know each other and we talked about splitting the district into zones to ensure better coverage, how to repair Chanasse's relationship with our Director (who is mad at him because he thinks he went over his head complaining of mis-directed fuel allowances), and the idea of using EWB's Agriculture As A Business curriculum for to help farmer groups develop livestock side businesses.

After that, I worked with our Information Officer, Stephen, to complete the minutes from our monthly staff meeting that happened the previous day. I've helped introduce a new Action Item focused format and Stephen is slowly becoming more comfortable with it. There's a deeply engrained culture over here of complaining about the many challenges that are outside our control and using these complaints to slip out of accountability for tasks. The Action Item minutes format and the other initiatives that we're working on (Earned Fuel Allowance, Calendar of Activities, etc...) are aimed at creating a basic foundation of accountability that the team will hopefully be able to continue building upon after I leave.

My third meeting of the day was with the Deputy Director. We discussed reporting challenges. Staff have to fill out monthly standard reports plus numerous miscellaneous project reports, all of which seem to request way more information than could be practically collected, even assuming staff had the resources to do it (i.e. fuel money). We resolved to identify the data that is truly useful to us in making decisions within our district and to prioritize this data – both its collection and verification. The staff will then just do their best with respect to all of the data requests beyond this. (An extreme example is the recent Farmer Registration initiative where 10 Extension Agents were supposed to travel all over the district collecting about 40 columns of information from 10,000 farmers, most of whom are illiterate and could only answer about half of the questions even if they wanted to).

So it was a great day for connecting with people in the office and progressing initiatives. In the evening, my Peace Corp friend Nhial and I showed a little bit of the movie A Bugs Life to a bunch of kids who often show up on our doorsteps with pencils and paper in the evenings wanting grammar lessons.

As for your question of what have I seen so far that inspires me and might inspire you, there are so many things to pick from...

What springs to mind first is the work of two amazing women leaders in the community, Madam Marta and Madam Francesca. They are both primary school teachers and they both lead women's groups. There behind the scenes work knits the community together. Madam Marta's group is tackling spousal abuse and child labour. Madam Francesca started a group two years ago to help stop a tribal conflict by bringing together women of different tribes (tensions still persist). Madam Francesca's group has already expanded their focus to include helping women to start small businesses and Madam Marta's group wants to begin doing this as well. I am helping to tie them into the support that is available through my Ministry of Food & Agriculture office and EWB's Agriculture As A Business Curriculum. I'm going to try to post more about them soon, so stay tuned.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabott.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabott.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Mervin Madill

**Subject:** 11-3-2010 - Your Day

Hi Mervin,

Happy belated birthday! I chatted with Mom and Dad this morning and they said that they really enjoyed your party.

I started your birthday with a meeting with a fellow Engineers Without Borders volunteer, Luisa, who had arrived in Kpandai the night before for a 3 day visit to work with one of the other government ministries (I am working with the Ministry of Food & Agriculture and she with the District Assembly). It was great getting to chat with her and share ideas.

The big focus of my workday was our monthly staff meeting, which I had been helping my Director to prepare. These meetings have been big opportunities to drive change in the office and this one was no exception. My Director introduced the Earned Fuel Allowance and Calendar of Activities initiatives that we had been working on. Then the office broke into teams and tried working with the new forms, which went well.

The meeting was cut a bit short because my Director had to leave for a meeting in Tamale. It turned out well, however, as I was able to build on the content from the meeting to have some amazing conversations with a few of the managers. I was particularly happy with my conversation with the Deputy Director, who I had previously had difficulty connecting with. This time I tried a new communication style and he opened right up, sharing many wonderful insights. If we can strengthen his

relationship with the Director a bit, I think their skills will complement each other tremendously. I am going to talk a bit more about my conversation with my Deputy Director in my blog post for this week, which I will post later tonight, so keep an eye out for it.

After work, I met back up with Luisa for dinner. We happened to run into the District Chief Director (second in command in the district) and a woman named Esther who runs the Kpandai credit union. We had a really interesting chat about the credit union and what financial services are available for subsistence farmers in the district. I thought that this was a fitting subject to close off your day with!

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabott.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabott.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott

**To:** Harish Raisinghani

**Subject:** 11-2-2010 - Your Day

Hey Harish,

On your day (November 2<sup>nd</sup>), I woke up still aching a bit from raising yam mounds four days earlier (I must be getting old!), so I decided to skip my run. I spent a good part of the day completing the APEGBC Innovation magazine article that I had been working on. It was a challenging article to write because there were many people involved and it changed focus a few times along the way, but I thought the final product was pretty good.

For the bulk of the day, I helped my Director to prepare the agenda and PowerPoint for the monthly staff meeting that was scheduled for the next day. These meetings have been a great opportunity to drive new initiatives and our plan was to finish rolling out the Earned Fuel Allowance and Calendar of Activity tools to the staff tomorrow and make them mandatory going forward.

In the late afternoon, we got an urgent request from Regional office requesting updated information on the flooding in our district. There's been massive flooding this year as a result of heavy rain and the water management decisions of two dams in Burkina Faso. As a result, Ghana is trying to manage the flow past their major dam on the Volta to balance the flooding damage up stream where we are and downstream towards the coast. I've visited several of the flooded fields and, based on conversations with my staff and some brief internet searching, it looks like a lot of people are going to be short of food next spring. Thankfully it seems like there is some movement by the government and aid agency.

So it was a pretty work focused day. In the evening, I had dinner and sat with my Peace Corp buddy Nhal. He's normally a really positive guy, but he was feeling a bit beaten down that day so I tried to cheer him up. Luckily I was feeling good about my productive day, so I think I was able to help.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

[www.markwjabott.wordpress.com](http://www.markwjabott.wordpress.com)

**From:** Mark Abbott  
**To:** James McPherson  
**Subject:** 11-1-2010 - Your Day

Hey James,

Your next day (November 1<sup>st</sup>) was a bit of a bizarre one. My Director asked me to go with him to a Root & Tuber program meeting in Bimbila, which is about a 2.5 hour ride away from Kpandai. I showed up at the office at the prescribed departure time of 7am, but predictably I was the only one there. Everyone else showed up over the next hour or so. In the end we squeezed eight people into the pickup truck (two in the back) including all of the middle managers and two farmer representatives, and we took off at about 8am for Bimbila. One of the farmer representatives happened to be my friend Paul who I stayed with on my village stay.

We were the third district to arrive at the meeting hall, so we had to wait for the other two to show up. We got a call that one of the district's trucks had broken down and they had to wait for a spare. Every district brought a similar entourage to ours, so there were quite a few people sitting around waiting.

I had not heard much about the purpose of the meeting beforehand. Turns out it was to plan and make district budgets for the continuation of the Root & Tuber program in 2011. Unfortunately the organizers of the meeting had failed to tell people to bring a computer. Thankfully I had brought mine along, so our team didn't have to resort to pen and paper. The organizers also failed to bring the electronic copy of the budget template they wanted us to fill out, so I had to recreate it before we could start budgeting.

The whole meeting pretty much consisted of my Director dictating a budget to me, which I converted into an Excel spreadsheet. Everyone else just stood around and marveled at my Excel handiwork. I felt pretty sorry for Paul, who had been taken away from his farm all day to just sit around. That is until the sitting allowances showed up...

I had heard of sitting allowances before, but this is the first time I'd ever received one. A guy came along and handed everyone an envelope, including me and Paul. I opened mine and it had 45 GHC in it, which is the equivalent of about \$40 Canadian and A LOT of money over here. (Paul's brother Reuben has been saving for the last few months in order to buy a 15 GHC cell phone).

Businesses don't generally give receipts over here so you pretty much have to give a per diem of sorts to cover travel and expenses if you want people to show up for meetings. Different programs have taken to using these sitting allowances essentially as bribes to get people to attend their meetings. There is something similar for farmer's meetings where you have to provide refreshment and perhaps money to allow them to take a day off from their fields. As a result of these allowances, it's hard to tell if farmers are interested in the programs you are running or if they just want a free lunch and a bit of cash.

As I rode back to Kpandai in the cramped truck, I realized that the whole meeting was basically just an excuse for people to get sitting allowances. They could have sent us an Excel file and we could have sent it to them. If they wanted to have a meeting to make sure it was done on time and followed the standard format, two people per district instead of eight would certainly have sufficed. Apart from the direct cost of these types of meetings, there's also the fact that it pulled away all of the managers from their normal work for an entire day. Sigh...

Monday was a discouraging example of the challenges to progress over here, but I'm glad I went as it allowed me to gain a better understanding of the sitting allowance challenge. The rest of my week actually went really well, so keep an eye out for my blog post later tonight.

Hope you are doing well.

Mark

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