

Avoid Betrayal

Sow the seeds of trust.



by Patricia Seemann

SINCE CULTURE AND standards of behavior are set from the top, leaders must look for signs of betrayal and ensure that their behavior—or tolerance of the behavior of others—does not condone it. People in positions of power need to understand the mechanics of intrigue, recognize its early signs, and know how to prevent betrayal.

Betrayal grows in the soil of distrust, disloyalty, deception, dishonesty, and treachery. Betrayal is evident in the motivation and methods of the schemer. The betrayer proves false to those who trust him. He lies, cheats, misleads, seduces, and deceives. Betrayal to one is courageous resistance to another.

When senior executives try to trip up a CEO in a dishonest way to further their own agendas, we call that betrayal. Betrayal is often motivated by the desire of senior executives to keep or augment their personal power.

Intrigue is a plot to achieve a purpose by underhand influence. Intrigue crosses the line of ethics, trust, and “politics.” Intrigue and betrayal are weapons of mass destruction to a company’s stockpile of trust. If several people are part of the intrigue, it makes the team dysfunctional. Traitors never trust each other.

Betrayal is rarely noticed until too late because it is rarely dramatic. Open acts of betrayal require considerable courage and energy. Most senior executives are highly skilled politicians and can veil their intentions and actions.

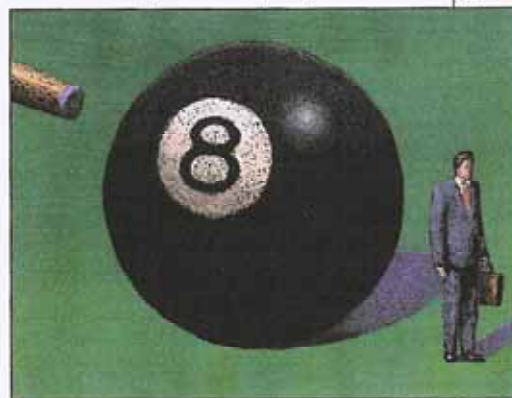
When suspecting betrayal, CEOs are tempted to look for specific and telling actions to trace the source. In fact, betrayal often is a long, slow slide that usually starts with inaction or so-called malignant negligence. Early signs of incipient betrayal often crop up in meetings when the betrayer exaggerates what a speaker says and discredits either the speaker or the source, suggesting a flaw in morality, judgment, or character.

The Warning Signs

Excessive flattery, false guidance, and inaction or deliberate sabotage signal intrigue of a more complex nature.

- **Flattery: gratifying deception and delusion.** Behavior that should make a CEO wary is excessive and lavish public affirmation by other senior executives of the CEO’s brilliance and the loyalty they feel toward him. In one case, a senior executive was promoted to the post of COO, in part because of his candor. Suddenly he began praising the CEO’s every move, and professing his intense loyalty. Outside the meetings, he stirred up an intrigue to bring down the CEO.

- **False guidance.** Another tactic is to let the CEO lose touch with reality. A CEO with a trusting leadership style is vulner-



able. Information is downplayed, contorted, colored, or omitted. The CEO becomes isolated from reality, can no longer make wise decisions, and his credibility wanes. Of course, the outcome is the same if the CEO does not want to listen, cannot face hard truths, or has an elevated view of himself. Senior executives need and want to be heard and involved in decision-making. Often this is a source of friction. Demands for involvement are healthy, but when suddenly the people around a CEO step back, acquiesce, wash their hands of decisions, and no longer push back, saying “It’s his decision,” start worrying.

- **Deliberately faithless behavior.** To prevent inaction, leaders often set up action plans and track who is obeying or complying with standards and rules. Senior

executives, however, are far too smart to be caught in the act of blatant insubordination. So they work around these plans with perfidious or deliberately faithless behavior. They may undermine the CEO by starting the action in an area where they know it will fail. They can also try to ignore an action item and hope that in the whirlwind of a CEO’s daily agenda, it will drop off his radar screen.

- **Intrigue: the exertion of tortuous or underhanded influence.** Overt action is not a preferred route for betrayal because it risks making the traitor visible. The traitor wants to survive the betrayal. No one trusts a traitor ever again, not even those who profit from the betrayal. So, if possible, traitors aim to bring down the CEO without anyone knowing where the assault came from. Intrigue is the preferred weapon of betrayal, since the perpetrators can hide.

Avoid Sowing the Seeds

Sometimes CEOs provide fertile ground for betrayal. Here are five ways CEOs can avoid sowing the seeds:

- **Practice zero tolerance.** There is no moral behavior without sanction. Tolerating antisocial behavior, instances of insinuated disrespect and other early signs of intrigue, invites treacherous behavior.

- **Reward relevance rather than obedience.** Some CEOs think that obedience is more important than relevance, but it is easy to be obedient while undermining the CEO.

However, if the CEO rewards meaningfulness in his executives through his attention and respect, they will answer with truthfulness, courage, and loyalty.

- **Remember that hard truths beget strong loyalty.** If a CEO rewards hard truths with harsh treatment, he only has himself to blame when his people start feeding him what he wants to hear.

- **Never humiliate!** Betrayal works both ways. Indeed, subordinates are far more often betrayed (or perceive that they are). The easiest form of betrayal is the humiliation of a subordinate or colleague. People never forget and never forgive humiliation.

- **Administer notable and excessive sanctions.** Sanctions must be notable, excessive, and swift. Any hesitation will be interpreted as vulnerability or a lack of courage.

Sanctions must be public. Nothing kills an intrigue like publicity. Never sanction such behavior in private. Make sure that everybody who might orchestrate an intrigue knows what the sanctions will happen. Excessive sanctions send the message that there is no room for people who will betray others. We abhor betrayal because it cuts deeply into trust.

Again, avoid humiliating the person while administering sanctions. You must be tough with sanctions, but avoid actions that may be seen as vengeful or infringe on the dignity of the traitor.

Stay Sober on Tonic of Power

Power can make CEOs light headed. There may be a temptation to use people as pawns. A CEO does so at his own peril.

- ***Know where your inner compass points.*** The higher people rise, the more they feel they can fulfill their own goals in the firm. The passion that comes from identifying one's own destiny with that of the firm is essential for any senior executive. But if personal goals have little to do with the firm's well-being and all to do with self-aggrandizement, an act of betrayal may seem virtuous to the perpetrator.

- ***Know where the inner compasses of your colleagues point.*** How well do you know what drives your colleagues? What are their unmet needs? Look for an alignment of beliefs, thinking processes, and behavior in each of them. Pay attention to the fault lines. Discuss certain questions with colleagues: "Where do you see yourself going in your professional life? In this company? Has your thinking changed recently? Given your skills and instincts, are you in the best position you could be? Do you have the authority you need? What would you do with more authority?" The most reliable answers will be unsure. If you get a well-prepared list, you are likely not getting the truth.

- ***Be prepared for surprises.*** Be prepared for surprising answers and take them seriously. The most effective way to prevent betrayal is to accept that it happens. Be aware that the "victim" often sows the seeds for it. Watch for early signs of intrigue, monitoring your own behavior, and acting swiftly when betrayal happens.

If these precautions fail, act with dignity and honor—cornerstones on which you can build your future. EE

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ACTION: Build trust to avoid betrayal.