

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

November 11, 2008

Defending Against Career Saboteurs

Ways to Protect Your Reputation -- and Your Job -- From a Boss or Colleague With Ulterior Motives

By SARAH E. NEEDLEMAN

It's been five years since Victoria L. Rimasse escaped the wrath of an alleged backstabbing boss, and she still hasn't shaken the experience.

Ms. Rimasse was a legal assistant at a large law firm in New Jersey where, she says, her boss would regularly take credit for tasks she completed. For instance, she once went to work early to fax an urgent document to a partner at trial in another city. She says she later overheard her boss accept a hearty "thank you" from the attorney for sending the fax.

Ms. Rimasse, a law-school graduate, also says her boss would reject her offers to help proofread critical reports, one time suggesting that she assemble cardboard boxes instead.

Hurt and frustrated, Ms. Rimasse resigned after two years, despite having been content at the firm for seven years when reporting to someone else. Now director of marketing and business development at Eisner & Lubin LLP, a midsize New York accounting firm, she says she has trouble trusting people. "I was in therapy because of it," she confesses.

[Sabatoge] Mike Kasun

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How might you prevent a conniving colleague from damaging your reputation or stealing credit for your work? If a saboteur strikes, what's the best way to react? Share your views.

When a boss or colleague works to sabotage your career -- or you perceive you're being sabotaged -- no matter the reason, it can be tough to cope. Complain, and you're no longer considered a team player or may be accused of imagining the situation. Sit back and do

nothing, and your career advancement could be in jeopardy.

Saboteurs are most apt to strike in a weak economy like the current one, warns Wendy Alfus Rothman, president of Wenroth Group, a consortium of business psychologists in New York. "When the market is bad, there is real insecurity because there are fewer jobs and more people competing for them," she says. "You have a pretty good recipe for potential backstabbing."

Case in point: During a meeting last spring, Rebecca Lieb says her boss at a financially strapped publishing company proclaimed, "I will do anything necessary to keep my job." Soon after, Ms. Lieb says, her boss let her and several of her colleagues go, citing the need to cut costs. But Ms. Lieb, who had been a vice president, says several of her colleagues claimed that the boss had recently been taking credit for their work. That, and his earlier comment, led Ms. Lieb to conclude that the decision was self-motivated. Ms. Lieb says it felt as if her boss "threw several of us under the bus to create a degree of job security for himself."

Not all saboteurs provide clear signs of their motives. Consider what happened to Jim Saylor in the early 1990s when he was an assistant accounting manager at a large manufacturer. Mr. Saylor learned that a colleague vying for a promotion spread a rumor that Mr. Saylor was bad-mouthing another internal candidate in an effort to make that person seem unqualified for the job. He only learned of his supposed malfeasance when his boss -- who was new to the team -- confronted him. "He indicated this

was something he ... had very bad personal feelings about," recalls Mr. Saylor.

To restore his reputation, Mr. Saylor says he calmly told his boss that the accusation was bogus. He then asked for help putting the gossip to rest. "It could've been very, very messy for me," says Mr. Saylor, now a director of internal audit at Enodis Corp., a manufacturer based in New Port Richey, Fla.

If a colleague attempts to denigrate your character, blame you for something you didn't do or steal credit for your work, make sure to keep your cool, advises Vicky Oliver, author of "Bad Bosses, Crazy Coworkers & Other Office Idiots." Showing a temper "erodes your professionalism," she says.

Don't confront the saboteur. First, carefully weigh the unpleasant possibility that your assumptions about the person are false. "Look in the mirror," advises Ms. Oliver. "Make sure it's not you that's the problem." If you're unsure, consult with a trusted colleague or mentor.

Should you then feel certain that you're in the right, talk to your boss in private about the issue, says Ms. Oliver. Your boss's opinion of you will have the most impact on your ability to advance, she says. If your boss is the saboteur, consider asking a colleague you trust at the boss's level or higher to address him or her on your behalf, Ms. Oliver says.

Lacking that option, you might approach your boss directly. Just bear in mind that "if your boss is really entrenched in the organization, it's going to be [him] or you," Ms. Oliver says. If things can't be resolved, "one of you will have to probably leave," she says.

Such a drastic response might not be necessary. Going forward, you may be able to stop a conniving boss or colleague in his or her tracks by putting every idea, suggestion and accomplishment into a time-stamped

document, like an email, says Janet Reid, a co-founder and principal partner at Global Lead LLC, a management-consulting firm.

Ms. Reid took up the strategy early in her career while working as a research chemist at a large consumer-products company. Six months into the job, it became clear that her boss was touting ideas she'd conveyed to him in private as his own in reports to senior managers. Once she was certain this was happening, she says, she began putting all her ideas into emails to her boss and copied her colleagues. "The lesson," she says, "is to put a stake in the ground."

Denise Moorehead says she once scored justice by chance. She was working in public relations at a college when a colleague told Ms. Moorehead's boss she'd refused to help out on an assignment and it later went afoul because of her lack of participation. In reality, Ms. Moorehead says the colleague didn't approach her for support until after the problem occurred. At that point, she says, there was nothing she could do. Ms. Moorehead says she explained this to her boss, who nonetheless questioned her ability to be a team player.

A few weeks later, the finger-pointing colleague invited a close friend of Ms. Moorehead to lunch in hopes of recruiting her to head the school's endowment committee. The friend, who was aware of Ms. Moorehead's troubles with the colleague, invited Ms. Moorehead along. When Ms. Moorehead showed up at the lunch, the saboteur "looked like she was going to swallow her tongue," she says.

The personal connection with someone her colleague was looking to win over immediately raised Ms. Moorehead's clout. After that, their working relationship changed dramatically. "It was amazing," says Ms. Moorehead, now a communications director at Third Sector New England, a nonprofit in Boston. "Suddenly I could do no wrong."

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