

CAREER COUCH

The Perils of an Office Coup

By MATT VILLANO Published: June 25, 2006

Q. You and your colleagues have concluded that your supervisor is incompetent. How do you lobby for his removal without damaging your own career?



Chris Reed

A. Focus on what's best for the business, said Clay Nelson, president of Clay Nelson Life Balance, a consulting company in Santa Barbara, Calif. "This should not be a lynching of the manager," he said. "Communicating the needs and input of your team will go much further than ranting and raving, nit-picking and getting personal."

Q. What are warning signs that your supervisor has trouble managing?

A. Incompetence comes in many flavors. If your manager overdelegates tasks to you and your colleagues, he may not understand how to tackle things on his own. If he jokes around during important meetings, he may not grasp the gravity of his responsibilities. Other red flags include excessive procrastination, extended time away from the office and a general lack of interest in what's going on with the company as a whole.

If there is reason to believe that he is an outright liar, you have a big problem. Peggy Klaus, president of Klaus & Associates, a leadership consulting firm in Berkeley, Calif., said that one of her clients had to deal with a manager who assured colleagues that he was attending meetings on their behalf when, in fact, he was out golfing. "This manager had all of his higher-ups fooled," Ms. Klaus said. "But on my client's level, everybody knew what was happening, and they resented him for it."

Q. Is it dangerous to discuss the situation with co-workers?

A. As long as you have colleagues you can trust, it makes sense to share your thoughts with them. But Scott Salmirs, executive vice president of American Building Maintenance, a building services company in New York, warned that employees should try to have these discussions outside of work on personal time.

Mr. Salmirs added that employees should also be mindful not to share their innermost feelings.

"There's too much at stake in a situation like this to pour your heart out," he said. "Be honest, but don't say too much. You don't want to give somebody something they could use against you."

Q. At what point should you take action?

A. Speak up when frustration with your manager affects your ability to do your job. Stephen Viscusi, author of "On the Job: How to Make It in the Real World of Work" (Three Rivers Press, 2001), said, "If you're thinking about quitting over an incompetent manager, clearly the situation has gone too far."

Rick Brenner, president of Chaco Canyon Consulting, a management consulting firm in Cambridge, Mass., added that employees whose managers were verbally abusive, harassed other workers or committed crimes such as fraud or insider trading had an obligation to speak up immediately.

In these cases, Mr. Brenner said, inaction could be more dangerous than any of the alternatives, particularly if doing nothing exposes you — or your employer — to legal liability.

Q. Where can you turn for help?

A. Some big companies have outsourced 24-hour, toll-free hot lines that serve as outlets for employees to express concerns or grievances anonymously. These hot lines are often run by independent organizations that document complaints and turn them over to a company's human resources department. If no hot line is available, employees can go to human resources directly. This won't be anonymous, however.

Some companies also run annual exercises in which employees can submit performance reviews for managers while managers are evaluating them.

Finally, an employee may schedule a face-to-face conversation with a higher-ranking boss, but Mr. Viscusi warned that this approach could be very risky. "The boss could be your manager's buddy," he said. "Then what do you do?"

No matter the avenue you take, it's important to cite specific examples to support each of your claims, said Heather Gately, executive vice president for human resource services at AlphaStaff, an outsourcing company in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. If you're concerned about lackluster departmental performance, for instance, put together a spreadsheet that highlights a decline over eight quarters of work.

"You don't want to go in and say, 'My manager is incompetent and doesn't know what the heck he's doing,'" she said. "Instead, give your bosses all of the data they need to see the problem and communicate to the manager what needs to change."

Q. What risks do you run by trying to remove a manager?

MAIL PRINT REPRINTS SAVE

More Articles in Business >

Get DealBook by E-Mail

Sign up for finance news, sent before the opening bell. See Sample nyth@chacocanyon.com Sign Up Change E-mail Address Privacy Policy

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED

- 1. Practical Traveler: How to Get the Best Exchange Rate (and Avoid Fees)
2. Havens | Paris: You'll Always Have Paris
3. Women Have Seen It All on Subway, Unwillingly
4. Market Forces Pushing Doctors to Be More Available
5. 33 Innings, 882 Pitches and One Crazy Game
6. Op-Ed Columnist: We Need Chloe!
7. Music Review | Bruce Springsteen With the Seeger Sessions Band: Folk Revival as Only Springsteen Can Do It
8. Court Says S.E.C. Lacks Authority on Hedge Funds
9. The Energy Challenge: For Good or Ill, Boom in Ethanol Reshapes Economy of Heartland
10. Paying Any Price to Live Here

Go to Complete List >

sponsored by

nytimes.com/theater

Buy your theater tickets on NYTimes.com today!

Also in Theater:

- Buy tickets to see Sandra Oh in "Satellites"
Buy tickets to "Jersey Boys," winner of the Tony for best musical
Buy tickets to see Oprah Winfrey's "The Color Purple"

ADVERTISEMENTS

Scottrade: More than 57 Trades. It's Called Value & We Value You.

A. Sir Isaac Newton once wrote that every action has an equal but opposite reaction; that law of physics applies in the office, too. Your manager is not going to be happy about your complaints, and if he is not replaced, you may be lucky if he just ignores you.

Some form of retaliation would not be surprising, Mr. Brenner said — perhaps a demotion, an increased workload or travel assignments to the least desirable cities in a region.

And it's possible that that your manager will have you fired. Billie Blair, president of Living and Learning, an organizational change management firm in Los Angeles, said employees should consider all of these potential consequences before speaking up.

"Only you can decide if the situation is bad enough to warrant action," she said. If you determine that the situation is not worth losing your job over, she added, the best strategy may be to request a transfer to another department or to keep quiet and move on with your life.

[More Articles in Business »](#)

[Start your 14-day free trial of TimesSelect now.](#)