

CHANGE @ WORK

Overseeing the colleague who once eyed your job

Patricia Kitchen
Change@work

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A good job market means chances for good career moves. Alas, all good things have some catches. And one associated with a nice move to a new company can be this: You find yourself face-to-face with one of your serious rivals for the job - an inside person who now reports to you.

Those electing to come into a work culture that fosters low-life, killer-swamp behavior will know just what to do with such a person. It's too ugly to say here, but we hope it's done swiftly and painlessly - just take a cue from top-level executive suites, where inside contenders disappear as fast as a lizard's lunch.

For everyone else, workplace experts suggest you cut the person a little slack - just a little and not for long. Certainly, such contenders can work, often in stealth, to undermine you. But if they bring a certain degree of emotional intelligence to the party and you bring smart management skills, they can actually become allies.

So, within your first three months, you have to size up the situation and identify "keepers, maybes and not-a-fits" on your staff, says Jan Margolis, managing director of Metuchen, N.J.-based Applied Research Corp., a consulting firm that helps employers get new hires up to speed fast.

Here are steps she and others say can be helpful.

Scope it out

Get a rundown of your new staff before you start. Ask your new boss to fill you in on your key players, as well as how they might feel about you as a newcomer, says Duffy Spencer, a management trainer and executive coach in Westbury. That should tease out mention of anyone who may have been a contender for your job.

Early feedback

Forget about a six-month review, says one former Wall Street executive who once took a job that one of her new staff members had wanted. Ask your boss in an informal way at the two-week mark what the staff is saying about you. If it's a playful culture and you can pull off humor, you can even say what that executive said: "So, have I alienated anyone yet?" It's a way, she says, of learning if your former rival is - note this exquisite euphemistic phrasing - "having an adjustment problem."

Confront

If that is the case - the person shows early signs of bad-mouthing, withholding information, challenging - you have to address the rivalry issue. Yes, most of us would eat 6-week-old celery before initiating such a conversation. But you show as much backbone as a limp vegetable if you let the issue slide, says John Putzier, a human resources consultant in Prospect, Pa.

So, in a one-on-one, ask open-ended questions about how the person is adjusting to you in this role. (Touch base first with human resources for some coaching.) If the person is reluctant to open up, try a technique Spencer calls self-disclosure, as in: "Boy, if I were in your situation I might feel a little resentful/frustrated" at reporting to the person who got the job I wanted. Then shut up and listen.

When the person is done, ask what he or she wants now and how you can help, promising nothing outside your power or too threatening to your own position. It may be as simple as a new face-saving title or help with a transfer to another department.

It's a conversation Tina Baker of Freeport says she wishes she had had early on after taking a job at a technology firm several years ago - a job an inside staffer had also wanted. The subject just seemed too "petty" to mention, she says. But within a year the disgruntled employee had gathered supporters and was rattling cages in the human resources department.

Outline your expectations

If the person does not get with the program, brush up on your "managing difficult people" skills. Give detailed, specific instructions, says Darlene Aiken of Central Islip, a former higher-education administrator who coaches teenagers in college readiness skills. Say you want the task completed a week from today. That, she says, "gives no room for manipulation. There's no way they can say, 'I didn't understand what a week meant.'"

Also, make note of any "needs improvement" critique you give, a practice which Baker says served her well. When her staffer lodged complaints, Baker produced a stack of e-mails she had sent the person pointing out work errors. "My feelings may have been bruised, but my management skills stood up," says Baker, now a songwriter and author who does ministerial work. Her regret: not having sent copies right along to human resources.

Get tough with the boss

Often this inside person has amassed power, so when you bring the issue to your boss he or she may, in classic avoidance mode, ask you to try to work it out. Keep the boss in the loop as to your continued attempts, but at some point, Margolis says, you have to lay it on the line. Tell the boss that he or she has given you certain objectives and that you need "different resources" to accomplish them. Make this a fact-based, not emotional, conversation, she says.

Maybe it's OK

Of course, there is the possibility that you're overreacting. Perhaps the person snarls at you but otherwise does the job without contaminating the office. If that's the case, suck it up. "If they don't like you, they don't like you," says Annemarie Segaric, a work-life coach in Manhattan. "This is not about trying to make friends."

Strategic nudge

If you are barred from banishing the person to the Skunk Flats Junction office, you still may get rid of him. Steer clear of dirty tricks, though. In your heart, send him good wishes. Maybe he'll find a new job on his own. Or maybe you'll do what one former manager in Manhattan did years back with a problem employee. When a recruiter called, the boss said, "This opportunity's not quite right for me, but, boy, do I have a guy for you!"

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Get ahead - not revenge

Sabotaging your new boss who got the job you wanted may sound so pleasing, but better to take the high road, work-life coach Annemarie Segaric says. Here are her thoughts:

Know that "disappointment happens - there are things we get in life and things we don't." Yes, that's harsh, she says, but it's one lesson in learning to manage your expectations.

Wherever you direct your energy, that's what you get more of. You want more misery and resentment? Then keep dissecting the issue with colleagues. Otherwise, focus on steps to get yourself to a better position.

Instead of asking the decision-maker to justify his or her choice of the outsider, ask what you need to do - skills and behaviors to develop - to make yourself attractive for a move up.

QUOTES

1) 'If they don't like you, they don't like you. This is not about trying to make friends.'- Annemarie Segaric, a work-life coach in Manhattan, who advises putting up with friction from a staff member if the work and colleagues don't suffer

2) 'My feelings may have been bruised, but my management skills stood up.' - Tina Baker of Freeport, describing how she dealt with complaints from a staffer by keeping records of all the critiques she had sent to the person

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