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Angry reaction to boss could spark backlash

By SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

One of my colleagues is a fine engineer, relatively new to the industry but with a fair amount of experience. We're friendly and have a relationship of mutual respect.

The problem? He has a highly developed sense of justice, combined with a tendency toward paranoia and a bit of an accusatory nature. His recent response to not being selected for an expected promotion took the form of deep research into how the decision was made, followed by angry letters to the powers-that-be.

I fear that if he keeps this up, he will not help his case and may well provoke people in a position to harm him. He admires and trusts me but is stubborn.

Should I offer him advice, or should I just listen sympathetically?

--The Confessor

Dear Confessor:

Do both. Listening sympathetically underpins a relationship of mutual respect. But mutual means he also has to listen to you, even if he is unlikely to hear your message.

If he trusts and admires you, then you have earned the privilege of trying to nudge your friend toward self-preservation.

I wouldn't go so far as mounting an intervention. But I would look for an opening next time he voices his righteous indignation. When he does, express understanding about his feelings of being unfairly treated. If you think he deserved that promotion, tell him.

Still, encourage him to back off from making accusations. People who feel unfairly treated at work most often have one of two personality types, research shows: aggressive or depressive. A study of 350 randomly selected government employees showed that aggressive workers perceive themselves as targets more often than non-aggressive types, whereas sad sacks see themselves as bearing the brunt of indirect aggression more often than other employees, according to research by Karl Aquino and colleagues at the Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia.

The researchers found that when these employees reacted to their perceived mistreatment in character -- meaning aggressively, like your angry friend, or by

complaining, in the case of a sad sack -- they tended to provoke a backlash from the powers that be.

Even if he's right, your friend's tendency to blame his superiors could invite an encore. So your hunch is well founded -- there's evidence that your colleague's dogmatic and aggressive search for explanations from the authorities is more likely to result in revenge than any move on their part to repair a miscarriage of justice.

Dear Susan,

I am finishing an MBA, and I have learned that the most important aspect of a business is its people, no matter the type of company or its size. However, my school's curriculum offers a total of three credits of human resources courses in a 90-credit program.

Although I am now looking for a new position, at my current job I observe human relations gone terribly wrong every day, from superiors putting their noses in every little decision, thereby frustrating their employees, to colleagues not-so-slyly dissing each other. The amount of resentment in my department is immense, yet we learn nothing in MBA programs about how to deal with this.

Isn't the gap in human resources training in MBA programs bound to produce managers who are androids?

--Data

Dear Data:

An MBA on your résumé doesn't mean you're a fully formed, finely tuned cyborg. Any recent graduate who is straight with himself or herself realizes that he or she has more to learn when emerging with a newly minted degree, no matter how spruced up the curriculum with human resources, ethics and entrepreneurship courses, and regardless of the opportunity costs of taking two years to down them whole.

Even with experience behind you, the point of all these courses is to prompt you to ask the right questions, to find the gaps.

And you have. If you suspect that your new facility in corporate finance just highlights what you still don't know about how people behave in organizations, you're right.

But so what? Going back to school is part academic exercise, part networking. With the contacts you've made at business school, finding a mentor, coach or leadership training should be a cinch. Or target an opportunity for coaching in your job search.

People who hire MBA graduates share your sentiment: that more could be done to help future execs acquire soft skills. But not all are convinced that a business program is the best place to learn them.

"An MBA is a technical degree. It's not an organizational effectiveness degree," said Roger Korman, the former chief executive officer of IMS Health Inc. and the current CEO of Aptilon Inc.

"MBAs just don't get down to the practical level in human resource management. They look beyond practical application to higher levels, like organizational structure."

Mr. Korman, like others I spoke to, is adamant that people skills should be a prerequisite for senior management. But they can be learned from a leader or coach, in a liberal arts classroom, or at a parent's knee.

"This is so variable, it's so complex. You can see figures and numbers, but it's much harder to see the behaviour behind them," Mr. Korman said.

Two masters degrees and a PhD in social work gave Mr. Korman a leg up in the people department, he says.

But with only a weekend of straight business training behind him, the technical stuff was his missing piece. "You can always hire that expertise," he said.

Should MBA programs be expected to cover all the bases, from e-business and economics to ethical management of employees?

I asked Marcel Desautels, the president of the Canadian Credit Management Foundation, who just donated \$22-million to McGill University's faculty of management, whether some of that money should be used to teach interpersonal skills to managers.

"I don't know that they're teaching a course in that," said the lawyer affably. "But the students are involved in so much -- the community, intramural events and charities -- that they learn it by involvement in what they're doing," he said.

It's no surprise that a philanthropist thinks community work provides the missing piece.

An android wouldn't think of that -- using extra resources to improve one's relationship with others. That's because an android can't get outside himself to see what's missing.

You can.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.

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