



Working Through the Minefield

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Often, staff members find themselves between two competing important forces within their companies, in a situation that could blow up any moment, and leave a sometimes non-involved person as one of its casualties. What can you do if, as disconnected as you might want to be, you find you are caught in the middle of a power struggle?

1. Real Live Examples

Dave P., a CEO and founder of a microchip design firm was engaged in a power struggle with the CTO, Egon, also a Board member, recognized as a world-leader in his field and essential for the success of the company's design endeavors. It was much like the star hockey player, the top scorer in the league, being at odds with his coach: one of them has to go and it won't be the star. So Dave was told by his Board that he was finished and that a search was now on for a new CEO. As a founder and major shareholder, Dave remained in place to ensure an orderly transition.

Michel N., a property manager, reported to a supervisor, Clarissa, who was at odds with a member of her company's executive, Ted. Not only was Ted an executive of the company but also he was a vociferous member of Board of the condominium corporation that Michel was overseeing. Michel would receive orders from his boss, Clarissa, regarding this condominium only to have them discounted by Ted the bearish condominium Board member at the Board meetings themselves or even as Michel was trying to execute his apparently logical instructions. Finally it all came to a head when Ted was able to convince his corporate partners that Clarissa was incompetent. Clarissa was fired and it was deemed that the two property managers reporting to her, had to go in order to clean house, Michel, among them.

Eldridge S., a research scientist, and the single largest shareholder of a public medical research company, working on natural drugs to enhance metabolism was also a board member. When the set of tests on 'pigs proved less than spec-

tacular, executives of this one-product company began to panic. The CEO, and the CTO, set themselves to undermine both the product and the developer, Dr. Eldridge. They tried to steer the company towards a merger with a more stable product development firm.

Alex W., a marketing person with an Eastern European branch of a large American company found himself shifted from the Regional (country) office to the Eastern office. His relationship with both bosses had been and was excellent, except that the eruption of a power struggle between the Regional VP and the Eastern VP placed him in a awkward situation. While the Eastern group was responsible for 65% of revenues (and Regional for 35%), it was Regional VP who reported to HQ in Vienna for both. Alex found that the Regional VP, the one with the more influence, was now ignoring Alex and providing very 'political' answers to him despite the previously superb relationship Alex had enjoyed with that Regional VP. Because of his influence, Regional VP could significantly impact Alex's reputation within the company. Alex, unaccustomed to company politics wanted to know what he should do to survive.

2. Solutions

This paper would ideally offer solutions for each of the protagonists, but to do so would make the article seem interminable. So we offer notes on the approach taken for the first one; but solutions for the others are available on request. Please contact us for more.

3. A Solution for Dave P.

It was crucial for Dave, a de-frocked CEO, to get outside advice so that he could remain objective



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and put his emotions aside in order to navigate the best way through this minefield. First it was important to ascertain what the best result should be. Dave thought that it would be best for him to gracefully submit and assist with the search for the new leader. However to the tandem of Dave and his advisor, it was clear, that Dave, as the founder and innovator, a brilliant man and a very active doer, was essential for the well being of the long-term future of the company. He had to regain his spot as CEO. Not only would that serve the company, it would also serve Dave, both as a leading shareholder and from a personal point of view.

The strategy was to demonstrate to the Board that Dave was in charge, that he would take control of the CTO and the overall company situation. No Board really wants to change CEOs unless it seems the only option open to them. At the next Board meeting, Dave did not plead for his job but instead laid out a short 3-month strategic plan for getting out of the present tight situation. He explained that it involved an outsider helping to prioritize issues and setting up an action plan to address them. The Board immediately approved a budget for this new initiative. However, before that Board meeting Dave brought Egon, the undermining CTO, into his office, with the consultant present and announced to Egon that this CEO was no longer going to tolerate anyone bypassing company agreed-upon processes and procedures, including Egon. Further Dave advised that he had engaged an outside consultant to ensure objectivity and to make sure that Dave himself was being fair to Egon and any other executives in the company. Dave stated that he did not want to be blind-sided at a Board meeting, so Egon was to deal with all issues of concern with Dave before the meeting – in the presence of the consultant to permit and facilitate a fair exchange of views. Thus, Egon became much more subdued at the next Board session and such subsequent meetings.

An appropriate straight jacket was placed on Egon by Dave (and the consultant), which Egon detested but, because it was fair, others within the company clearly sympathized with the views and approaches of the CEO, Dave. Other staff members were quick to point out when Egon strayed from the agreed-upon norm. Gradually Egon became ostracized because of his continued rogue-like behavior and mood, became in charge of a department of one while Dave's prestige as a leader rose dramatically within the enterprise. The finish to the story is that Egon went off to another company, his fine technical reputation in tow, and Dave found a sound, more cooperative replacement. Dave sold his company according to his own schedule, made himself a rich man, the company prospers to this day. And Dave founded himself a new company to further realize his creative energies.

4. Some Lessons Offered

To summarize what was learned in the four situations, we would suggest:

- Get outside advice for objectivity and to bring in out-of-the-box thinking.
- Determine the best results that should emerge from the situation and set those as your goals.
- Don't underestimate your vulnerability.
- Don't underestimate the importance of your contribution to the company.
(The two above are not mutually exclusive – many good people have been let go.)
- Take actions to show the Board or higher authorities that you are in charge of your own situation.
- Confront any peer who is causing you trouble and define:
 - o Boundaries, if any
 - o That you will take certain actions as consequences to crossing those boundaries
 - o Yet you will ensure fairness, even including third parties as referees
 - o That you will arrange to have open dialog with the person rather than behind-the-scenes innuendo
- Take inoffensive steps to involve the 'silent majority'.
- Create a method for getting constant written feedback (such as using a questionnaire that offers indisputable answers).
- Keep a file of these answers, building up a dossier of support for yourself.
- React immediately to negative feedback, correct the issue and confirm it has been corrected with the complainant in writing.
- In the face of innuendo or incomplete facts, assemble real facts with a third party and present them unemotionally.
- View and treat immature superiors as you would self-centered demanding babies.
- Cover your actions with documentation.
- Retain neutrality by not making any reference, good or bad, regarding either of the conflictive superiors vis-a-vis the other.
- Use emails to document facts by stating your understanding of the event, meeting, etc. – even, and especially, with superiors

Good luck!

Bill Caswell

References:

1. Caswell, W. E., *Training Your Boss*, CCCC Newsletter, CCCC Publications, January 2006.