

5 'Dirty Tricks' Common in Campus Administration

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"I feel like I am going crazy and need to run some things by you," said an administrative colleague. When we met, he began to describe a series of unsettling incidents. He wondered: Were they intentionally designed to signal that he was no longer wanted? Aimed at making him and the people in his program feel nervous and disoriented?

- First, the direction of a proposed major research effort was suddenly and inexplicably reversed.

- An important meeting to discuss critical funding was rescheduled at the last minute and then canceled again. It was rescheduled twice more and canceled both times, leaving him without the resources to move forward on what he had, until that point, believed to be a key priority.
- Then, during a large meeting, when someone asked a question about a potential reorganization, a senior administrator replied, "I'm not going to answer that because I want you to enjoy the holidays."

All of those incidents took place after recent leadership changes had prompted more than the usual power jockeying. "Am I imagining things," he asked, "or should I be worried about where this is all headed?"

My colleague is generally quite sensible and not prone to conspiracy theories, so I told him I thought he should trust his "Spidey sense" and watch his back. Things often move fast after a leadership change, and it was clear that my colleague no longer possessed the inner-circle status he had once enjoyed. If he can live with that, and wants to try to survive in the new world order, he needs to temper his habit of assuming the best of people with a dose of political reality.

To help him do that, I suggested he read Robert Greene's classic book, *The 48 Laws of Power*. It's an excellent primer for the unscrupulous, describing various dirty tricks that can be used to disorient and destabilize others while consolidating power. This 452-page tome features chapter titles like "Crush Your Enemy Totally," "Always Say Less Than Necessary," "Get Others to Do the Work for You, but Always Take the Credit," and "Keep Others in Suspended Terror: Cultivate an Air of Unpredictability."

I regularly recommend this book, not because I want people to use the strategies it details, but because I want them to recognize when the ploys are being used *against them*. Once you know what you are up against, you're in a better position to protect yourself.

There are certainly more than 48 ways to grab power and leave people disoriented. Here are five more that seem especially common in academic settings.

Dirty Trick No. 1: "Accidentally" make a colleague look bad. There are so many interesting ways to embarrass someone. One strategy involves creating the illusion of being helpful or informative in a message that is "accidentally" sent to several others, perhaps in a "reply all" email or via a departmental email discussion list.

Imagine the reaction when several people on an email chain receive a message that reads, "Daniel, your budget document has some pretty serious errors. Let's meet tomorrow morning, and I can help you get it in better shape for this week's meeting." And then that

email is followed with another: "My apologies, everyone; this was intended just for Daniel." The unspoken message: "Daniel" doesn't have a handle on his job, and his boss just let everyone know that.

Dirty Trick No. 2: Push a target off a "glass cliff." We all know that the "glass ceiling" refers to the invisible barrier that keeps underrepresented groups from rising up the ranks of an organization. The glass cliff is a metaphor that describes the practice of appointing women and people of color to especially difficult, risky, or contentious leadership roles in an underperforming organization and then blaming them for their inability to turn around an impossible situation. That kind of situation can destroy the career of the person given "the opportunity," hence the visual image of being pushed off a cliff.

If you are offered a challenge that seems impossible to manage, ask yourself if that's because you are uniquely qualified to solve a problem that others can't fix. Or are you being intentionally set up to fail in order to advance someone else's personal or political agenda?

Dirty Trick No. 3: Go silent. Discontinue communication. Cancel meetings. Fail to respond to messages. For this technique to work effectively, the person employing it must be completely and consistently unavailable because that is the best way to create maximum insecurity and anxiety.

The power hungry magnify the impact by drawing out the silence. They schedule a meeting and then cancel it at the last minute, perhaps even after you have traveled to the meeting spot. Then they reschedule the meeting and cancel it again. That process can continue for weeks or months.

This ploy can produce even more anxiety when the person you are supposed to be meeting with says something like, "I'm so sorry we weren't able to meet this week. I have some serious concerns I need to talk to you about" — and then abruptly cancels the next meeting, too.

Dirty Trick No. 4: Sow seeds of doubt. Creating concern about someone else's competence or character is a classic strategy for undermining their credibility.

The folks who practice this technique raise concerns about problematic behavior, but deny personal knowledge of it. Instead they rely on so-called secondhand allegations. They might say, "Her staff members say she is prone to emotional outbursts, but I've never seen her act unprofessionally," or, "His colleagues have suggested that he does inappropriate favors for donors, but I don't think there is anything to that. We should consider ourselves fortunate to have a development officer who is so committed to cultivating a spirit of giving among our alumni."

In short, the power-grabber looks like he or she is defending you while handily managing to cast doubt on you.

Dirty Trick No. 5: Slow things down. In 1944, the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency, created the "Simple Sabotage Field Manual." This once-classified booklet offered OSS officers guidance for training citizen-saboteurs in other countries to quietly and discreetly disrupt war efforts against the United States during World War II. The booklet offered instructions on how to damage equipment, transportation, and communication systems, but also included fascinating instructions for disrupting organizations, "based on universal opportunities to make faculty decisions, to adopt a noncooperative attitude, and to induce others to follow suit."

In a section of the manual on "general interference with organizations," the tactics for disrupting foreign governments look eerily familiar to those many of us see in the academic workplace today:

- Never permit shortcuts. Or, as the manual states: "Insist on doing everything through 'channels.' Never permit shortcuts to be taken in order to expedite decisions."
- Pontificate. "Talk as frequently as possible and at great length. Illustrate your 'points' by long anecdotes and accounts of personal experiences."
- Refer all matters to committees. "When possible, refer all matters to committees, for 'further study and consideration.' Attempt to make the committees as large as possible — never less than five."
- Focus on the trivial. "Bring up irrelevant issues as frequently as possible."
- Nitpick over phrasing. "Haggle over precise wordings of communications, minutes, resolutions."
- Reopen debate. "Refer back to matters decided upon at the last meeting and attempt to reopen the question of the advisability of that decision."
- Advocate caution. "Urge your fellow-conferees to be 'reasonable' and avoid haste which might result in embarrassments or difficulties later on."
- Express concerns about the propriety of any decision. "Raise the question of whether such action as is contemplated lies within the jurisdiction of the group or whether it might conflict with the policy of some higher echelon."

As the target of such dirty tricks, you initially might feel — much like my colleague — that you are overreacting or imagining things. And you might respond by working harder and trying to prove that you are worthy of attention and respect.

That rarely works. If you suspect you are being targeted, you probably are. Your survival generally requires that you move your political opponent to your side, or effectively and completely neutralize them.

But the best approach — always — is to take pre-emptive steps and avoid becoming a target in the first place. Faced with someone on a power-consolidation trip, you could try to position yourself as an ally, someone with expertise or connections that might prove useful to the power-grabber. Will that make you uncomfortable ethically? Maybe, but it also will

buy you some time until you can either craft a plan to deal with the problem internally, or exit successfully yourself. When it comes to organizational politics, it is better to play offense than defense.

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