

When Your Colleague Is a Backstabber

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The other day, a person I like and trust sent me a text: “(So-and-So) is throwing you under the bus right now.”

“No!” I texted back. “What now?”

Thanks to some fast finger work, I provided the real facts about the current meeting topic and my text partner was able to relay them and defend my honor. The crisis was averted and the benefits of cultivating a guardian-angel network were once again revealed.

But cultivating such a network is hard work. And ensuring that every gathering is populated by at least one person who will have your back is an impossible task. So what are the best ways to manage those people who seem intent on tearing you down?

Before we can manage them, we must seek first to understand them. In my experience, backstabbers usually extend their claws for one of the following reasons:

- They are highly ambitious, but politically unsophisticated. They think making others look small is the fastest path to looking big.
- They want to eliminate competition and believe that publicly challenging their target’s integrity or expertise is a way to make that person vulnerable professionally.
- Their professional qualifications and ability to deliver are in question, so they feel a need to deflect demands for accountability by calling into question the track records of others.
- They are highly insecure and want to diminish the status of those who appear to be more professionally successful.

Most of the backstabbers I know are insecure and maladjusted people who do not believe they can survive on their own merits — that's why they spend so much time trying to eliminate their perceived competition. Should we forgive backstabbers knowing that their behavior is likely driven by an inner turmoil they wrestle to control each day? I don't think so. Malicious actions should lead to negative consequences for the plotter, at least according to my view of the world.

In a November 2016 essay in the *Harvard Business Review*, Amy Jen Su offers some sound advice on "[How to Handle a Colleague Who's a Jerk When the Boss Isn't Around](#)." Don't take bad behavior personally, she advises, because you are probably not the Jerk's only target: "When you see the behavior, take a step back and be a spectator to what's going on. It's easy to assume we're onstage as a victim in this person's game; in truth, it's much more about your colleague's lack of self-awareness, insecurity, or past experiences."

While you're on your metaphorical balcony observing the situation, consider whether it makes sense to call out the bad behavior or involve others in the dispute. Su notes that if the behavior is just annoying, but has no real impact, it's probably worth letting go.

But what if the backstabber's actions or comments pose a true threat to your career or reputation?

I find that expressing curiosity rather than demonstrating outrage is often the best strategy. Say something like this to the backstabber: "I understand you've told several people that I am a poor committee co-chair. I wish you had shared that with me directly, but let's talk about it now. Help me understand your specific concerns?"

Or, to your boss: "My co-chair on the curriculum-design committee has told several people that I haven't been pulling my weight. Because I assembled the committee, led the information-gathering process, and wrote the final report, I don't think that assessment is fair and I'm confused about why she would say this. I just wanted to let you know that I will be talking to her directly soon. Do you have any advice for me when I have that conversation?"

Regardless of whether you confront the backstabber, follow Su's advice and resist the urge the urge to strike back. Instead, try to learn from the experience because backstabbers can teach us a lot. By observing their behavior closely, as Su notes, we can learn framing, storytelling, inquiry skills, and self-promotion tactics. By watching backstabbers in action, we can also learn what matters most to them, whom they consider to be both allies and members of the enemy camp, and how they handle those who make demands for evidence when accusations are uttered.

So instead of getting angry about our backstabbers, let's consider them research subjects. A little objective distance creates a feeling of control and when we're wearing an emotional shield of armor, it is harder for backstabbers to pierce us with their pointy claws.