

Build Yourself a Fortress

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Whenever a leadership transition is in the works, there is a fair amount of gossip about who will stay and who will go. Will the incoming leader vote everyone off the island and bring in a new team to ensure the loyalty of all lieutenants? Or will there be an effort to retain those who can support a smooth transition from the past to the future?

After witnessing quite a few leadership transitions — both inside and outside of higher education — I've discovered some secrets of the folks who seem to have Herculean staying power. I call them the "protected people."

A few protected people are safe from banishment because of their seemingly impossible-to-replace forms of expertise. But most of them are protected because they have built a personal fortress that keeps them safe from advancement or attack. A fortress, of course, is heavily protected and impenetrable. Slings, arrows, boulders, cannon balls, rotten cabbages — nothing gets through a fortress if the walls are thick enough, tall enough, and strong enough.

So how do we create political and professional protection for ourselves? Here are five ways — some clearly admirable and some clearly not — that protected people build their fortresses:

They establish a reputation for supporting the success of others. That might mean making introductions, offering writing advice, sharing strategic guidance, providing early alerts, or removing barriers — and doing so on a regular basis. When a new leader takes over, protected people are often the ones who can reveal things like:

- Which shared governance group has real power.
- Which community members require an immediate returned call, and which can wait a while.
- How to sell an idea to the campus.

- Who can be trusted — and who can't.

Supporting your colleagues offers you protection in three ways. First, it creates a sense of reciprocity: She helped me, so I should help her. Second, all leaders want to be successful, so it behooves them to surround themselves with people who can support that success. Third, when a person is valued, or even cherished, on the campus for being an honest and reliable go-to resource, a new leader will appear vindictive and capricious for casting that person out.

They have a broad and deep network. Few things are more professionally dangerous than being isolated and alone. Without supporters, we are easy targets. Arbitrary acts of persecution can be carried out safely when there is no support team to offer pushback or assign penalties.

The protected people forge mutually beneficial relationships — intentionally and energetically — with a diverse network that includes key influencers who will speak up should harm appear imminent.

They pay attention. The ability to connect dots and makes sense of our environment is a rare and valuable skill. The protected people know who is actually, or metaphorically, sleeping with whom. They know who is still angry about a dispute that occurred a decade ago. And they know the pet peeves and pet causes of those with power and influence. They use all of that valuable currency to trade with others.

They are not obviously evil. It is one thing to be voraciously ambitious and shrewdly calculating. But people who are obvious in their mistreatment of others don't usually last all that long. Protected people know that openly treating someone badly is frowned up, so when they want to inflict harm, or simply have an unpopular decision to implement, they make sure someone else's fingerprints are on their dirty deeds.

They make sure everyone knows they have ammunition. Some protected people make it clear that they have powerful and potentially embarrassing information. They know:

- Which colleague appears to have a habit of deleting outlier data points.
- Which department chair gave a pass to a student who plagiarized, in return for his father's kind contribution to the scholarship fund.
- Which exact month a certain executive assistant tinkered with the procurement evaluation matrix to ensure a service contract went to her close relative.

Rather than filing official reports, the protected people offer to keep things quiet and occasionally mention how terrible it would be for the news to get out.

Which of those five strategies have you used, or seen employed?

Some of them seem strategic, while others are just plain unscrupulous. Must we be Machiavellian to ensure our survival during a leadership transition, or to manage our long-term career success? Is it truly a good practice to dig up dirt, assign our hard decisions to those lower down the organizational food chain, or threaten others with exposure?

We all know that it is not, and that we can be professionally successful without engaging in political warfare. Being honest and honorable may not always offer obvious short-term dividends, but it tends to be a wise long-term career strategy that leads us to be surrounded by supportive allies rather than cowering sycophants.

As for those who make a habit of using dirty tricks? They usually run out of luck when their survival approach becomes obvious to enough people. And that often prompts a different question: Do we have an obligation to help others see who is truly deceitful, dishonest, and even maniacal?

I think so, but there are serious risks involved. Before embarking on that kind of crusade we need to gather an army, a suit of armor, and some mighty sharp tools. It is not easy to chip away at the bricks of a fortress that is protecting someone who is evil inside.