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When Your Colleague Is a Saboteur

"WHERE ON EARTH is it?" Mark Landstad wondered aloud. He scanned the sea of files in his predecessor's master folder on the company network one more time. "I know it must be here somewhere!"

Walking to the window, Mark gritted his teeth and scratched his face, which felt itchy and hot. He surveyed the crepuscular lights of London, as if the missing file might be hiding among them. Monday's presentation would be his first in front of CliffBank's senior management team. He'd only just moved from the firm's research department into its investment banking division, so making a good impression was critical. He'd been working on the slide deck all week, but he couldn't finish it without more up-to-date information – which he guessed was in the elusive file on Millhouse, the famous retail clothing chain CliffBank was trying to land as a client.

He needed a lifeline.

"Nicole," he whispered to himself. His new colleague and teammate on the Millhouse project might well know where to find the file, which supposedly included information about



the retailer's current acquisitions strategy. Unfortunately, she was 30,000 feet over China and wouldn't be reachable until Monday morning at the earliest.

Mark smiled as he recalled being immensely impressed with Nicole, especially when they first met. Gracious and bright-eyed, she'd been quick to welcome Mark into the division and help him acclimate. In her black St. John suit, with her smooth bob of blonde hair and shoulders thrown back, Nicole seemed astute, focused, on her game – every bit the competent executive. "Listen, any

questions, any time, feel free to pound screaming on my door," she'd offered. "I'm extremely busy, as we all are, but I want us to be a good team."

She'd taken him under her wing, introduced him to all the senior managers in the division, and invited him to a long lunch to bring him up to speed. Over drinks at a tapas bar, she had filled him in on the messy story of his predecessor,

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who'd gone haywire and been forcibly removed from the building. "It's a real shame about Patrick," she had told Mark. "He was a true master of M&A, and he knew the retail sector cold, but over the past year he became moodier and more disorganized. Then the paranoid e-mails. Quite frightening, really."

"Where is he now, do you think?" Mark had asked.

"Oh, no one seems to know," she'd replied, "but I do hope he's getting help."

Depressed now at the prospect of spending the weekend hunting for a madman's notes, Mark sank into his desk chair and loosened his tie. Down the hallway, he could hear the Friday-night cleaning staff's Hoover whirring near Nicole's office. He stared at the mesmerizing screen saver on his monitor. Another frenzied file search would yield nothing, he knew. The damned thing had probably been deleted.

What about Ian Beasley? The head of corporate strategy at Millhouse was, after all, a family friend. Without him, Mark wouldn't even be at CliffBank. Ten years earlier, on the strength of Ian's recommendation, Mark, with a fresh MBA in hand, had been hired as a researcher in Millhouse's finance department. The relationship with Ian had always been warm, and a successful stint at Millhouse had helped launch Mark's career as an equity researcher at CliffBank. Ian had even encouraged Mark to shift over to CliffBank's investment banking division. "Make the right moves, and you'll find yourself retiring early," Ian had advised him.

Mark nudged his mouse and broke the screen saver's spell. With great focus, he began typing an e-mail but then paused. Getting Ian to help him was probably not such a good idea after all. He might not relish taking time on a weekend to walk Mark through the details of Millhouse's acquisition strategy.

Mark minimized the e-mail window, clicked on his presentation, and contemplated the half-created slide. He'd

surely have to do some more fudging this weekend.

She's Got It Together

Mark leaned into Nicole's office and smiled. "How'd the trip go?" he asked.

"Great, thanks. I'm just a little tired. Awfully long flight."

You'd hardly know it, Mark thought.

"And you?" she asked politely. "How was your weekend?"

"Bit of a blur, actually. I spent forever working up some new slides. I looked high and low for that file you said Patrick kept on Millhouse – and ultimately couldn't find it. So I just cobbled something together."

"Oh, that's harsh," Nicole replied empathetically, pulling open a desk drawer.

merger activities, and its growing interest in smaller retailers. Whatever his slides lacked in information about Millhouse's current strategy he'd make up for in keen firsthand observations about the firm's methodical, long-standing approach to due diligence.

By 11:30, Mark was on tenterhooks. The meeting was scheduled for just after lunch, and Nicole hadn't yet responded. He walked over to her office, but the glass door was shut. She was on the phone, her back to him. He decided to fight his anxiety with a quick walk to grab a sandwich. Surely she would have reviewed the slides by the time he returned.

When he did, neither Nicole nor her assistant was around. He consoled him-

"Don't you just love living with the consequences of someone else's nasty habits?"

She produced a box of Swiss chocolates and offered him one, which he accepted. "I know that file is somewhere," Nicole added. "Patrick never seemed to save anything in its proper place. The file's probably on the hard drive of a junked laptop. Don't you just love living with the consequences of someone else's nasty habits?" She took a sip of tea, winked at Mark, and peeked at her computer monitor.

"Listen, Nicole, I know you must be inundated, but would you mind looking over the slide deck as soon as you can? I sent it to you last night. I want to make sure it looks all right from your standpoint before we present it."

"Right away. Will do," she said, staring at the monitor. "Just give me a minute."

Mark ducked out and returned to his office to rehearse his portion of the presentation. He'd decided to focus on Millhouse's past acquisition patterns and

self with the sight of the scrumptious wheat bread protecting his ham and cheese.

After nervously gobbling down lunch at his desk, Mark returned to Nicole's office, less than half an hour before the meeting, to find her leaning back in her chair, pursing her lips as she looked at her monitor. He forced a half smile to hide his annoyance.

"Looks great," Nicole said nonchalantly and clicked her mouse. "I think it will really make a good impression. All's well. See you in a few."

She Struts Her Stuff

As the senior managers streamed into the conference room, Paul O'Rourke, the head of the division, cast a kindly eye at Mark. Feeling a clutch of self-doubt, Mark grinned tightly.

"We've already done deals with six different companies in the retail sector," Nicole began after the lights dimmed. The slide listed several of Millhouse's

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smaller competitors in the clothing industry. “Of the remaining three that we’re pursuing, Millhouse is the largest.”

Nicole progressed slowly and deliberately through her portion of the slide set, and Mark felt his impatience growing. This is old news, he thought. Why milk it? He glanced around at the expectant faces.

“As you’ll recall, we speculated last year about whether Millhouse was likely to make any additional ambitious acquisitions,” she said. Then, her eyes brighter than ever, Nicole clicked to a slide Mark had never seen. It was

out giving him a heads-up? What kind of teammate was she?

“Good sleuthing, Nicole,” he overheard Paul say in the hallway.

Mark gave the floor the glare that he wanted to direct at Nicole. He would have confronted her right then and there, but for Paul. He’d have to take this up with her later. Privately.

She Blows Right Past You

Half an hour later, Paul strode into Mark’s office. “You know, Mark, I think we need more insight about what’s going on politically at Millhouse. I wonder

league of yours – Nicole, um, Collins. She was rather insistent about meeting with me. Perhaps she should come along?”

Mark nearly regurgitated the ham he’d eaten for lunch. “Oh, really? Well, yes, I suppose I should try to coordinate with her – ”

“I’ll just have my assistant check the calendar and set that up, maybe for next week. Nice to hear your voice.”

Mark hung up and marched down the hallway to Nicole’s office. He entered without knocking and shut the door behind him.

“Nicole, I want you to know that Paul asked me to meet privately with Ian Beasley. He’s *my* friend. What are you doing contacting him?”

Nicole looked up quickly from her desk. Her cheeks reddened. “There’s no way you’re going to meet with Ian if I’m not there!” She stood up confidently. “I’ve been working in this sector, and on Millhouse, for a long time. If you think you’re going to take that away from me, you’ve got another think coming!”

Mark decided to be direct. “Ah, I see. So it’s about grabbing most of the credit, is it?”

“Most of the credit? Ha!” She laughed as if mocking a schoolyard playmate. “I’m trying to grab *all* of the credit!”

Mark was visibly stunned. “Relax, Mark, you look stressed,” she said breezily as she strode past. Tilting her head at him, she opened the door and walked out.

Mark stepped into the hallway and watched Nicole turn the corner. His mind was reeling. He clenched his fists, stuck them in his pockets, and stewed. He would have punched Nicole’s office door, but for the glass.

Have You Had Enough?

Mark, temples throbbing, walked slowly toward Paul’s office. He felt as if he were in a dream and had no idea what he would say. He had to say something though.

Paul was on the phone, but he waved Mark in.

“Most of the credit? I’m trying to grab all of the credit!”

an org chart. “I recently discovered that Millhouse is considering reorganization.” Click. “This is what the new structure might look like.”

Stunned, Mark looked around again. Several of the managers were leaning forward with curiosity.

Paul spoke first. “I see that the organization is considerably flatter than the previous one. It looks like they might be planning to outsource several of their operations.”

Suddenly everyone was talking at once, like a gaggle of opinionated parliamentarians. Nicole hushed the room and began answering questions one by one, eating up the remainder of the hour. Mark knew he should interject, but his mind was in a whirl. This was exactly the kind of information that was supposed to be in the file he had been looking for. Why did Nicole have it, and why hadn’t she shared it with him? At 2:00, Paul ended the meeting, declaring that they would reconvene later that week.

Mark fumed silently as the executives filed out of the room. Even if Nicole hadn’t been hiding information from him, why had she inserted such an important fact into the presentation with-

out giving him a heads-up? What kind of teammate was she? “Good sleuthing, Nicole,” he overheard Paul say in the hallway.

Mark didn’t respond right away. He felt mildly uncomfortable about Paul’s request. After all, he considered Ian a friend as much as a business contact. Still, Paul was the boss. “Certainly,” Mark said.

“Maybe ring his office right now? The sooner you can talk with him, the better. Thanks, Mark.”

Paul turned to leave as Mark picked up the phone to call Millhouse headquarters. Part of him hoped that Ian would be out of the office, but the assistant put him right through.

“Well hel-lo, Mark!” Ian sounded genuinely glad to hear from his old protégé. “All settled in?”

“I have a marvelous office with a view of Parliament and your building just beyond,” Mark said lightly. “And I’ve got my first big assignment. It’s to set up a lunch with you. I’m on the retail team, and we want to see if we can move forward on a deal with you guys. So, when can you fit me in?”

“Funny you should say that. Just last week I received an e-mail from a col-

"Got a minute?" he heard himself asking uneasily after Paul had hung up. This was definitely new territory for Mark.

"Sure," Paul said, with a trace of impatience. "What is it?"

"I need some perspective on working with Nicole." He thought he heard his own voice echoing.

"What's the problem?" Paul asked.

"May I shut the door?"

"We have an open-door policy here," Paul answered a bit defensively, "but if that would make you more comfortable, go ahead."

Mark took a deep breath as the glass door clicked shut. "I got in touch with Ian Beasley, who told me that Nicole has already contacted him to suggest a meeting. In fact, it sounds like she has been quite, um, aggressively trying to build a relationship with him since Patrick's departure, before I was hired. It's been my understanding that I was brought in here, in part, on the strength of my connections."

Mark went on to describe his surprise at Nicole's presentation, struggling between a desire to simply vent and embarrassment at having put himself in an awkward position. He felt like a little boy who had run to the headmaster to rat on a bully. "I must say, I'm a little concerned about her behavior. Maybe she's just having a bad day, but..."

"Would you like me to speak with her?" Paul interrupted, clearly irritated by the prospect of having to intercede.

"No, that won't be necessary," Mark replied, trying to sound reassuring. "I just wanted to make sure you knew what was happening. I can fight my own battles."

"I'm glad to hear it," Paul said, relieved. "I realize that Nicole is an ambitious young woman, but you'll learn to respect her results. I have."

How can Mark regain his footing after being sabotaged?

Three commentators offer expert advice beginning on page 48.

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MARK MAY know a lot about finance and retail, but he's a novice when it comes to personal power.

Any organization operates as both a financial enterprise and a social system. And the system is not simply an organizational structure – interpersonal dynamics are the meat on the bones of that skeleton. My firm's research on such dynamics within organizations reveals that many people take and relinquish power according to patterns they internalized from their family systems. Often what makes or breaks a career isn't the thinking you do about workplace situations; it's how you react when you are too emotionally embroiled in the situations to think at all.

Most people acquire their dominant power styles from their experiences with authority figures in the family. To represent how these styles play out in an organization, my firm graphs an individual's level of seniority within the hierarchy against his or her tendency to get needs met by inspiring trust, fear, or some combination of the two. In comparing

team, to bring a fresh perspective. Like many anxious pleasers, he is so fearful of making a misstep that he fails to step up at all, allowing Nicole to have all the power. Mark cannot even be assertive in speaking to Ian, with whom he has a long-standing, positive professional relationship. He simply accedes to Ian's suggestion to invite Nicole to their meeting because his desire to please Ian gets in the way of the business at hand. He is like many anxious pleasers who spend lots of time wining and dining clients but still fail to close deals because they are more concerned with being liked than with achieving the commercial goal.

Nicole operates from an entirely different personality quadrant. She exhibits behavior typical of indirect commanders – using chaos as a control tactic. Conscious of her modus operandi or not, she tests the waters with Mark by not getting back to him before the meeting. Indirect commanders often try to rattle people in ways like that in order to disempower them.

Mark thinks he's being sabotaged, but in fact he's sabotaging himself.

the power people are formally assigned with how they use it, we have identified four main personality types: the anxious pleaser, the indirect commander, the direct commander, and the giver.

Mark is a classic anxious pleaser. He thinks he's being sabotaged, but in fact he's sabotaging himself. In the opening scene, Mark is his own worst enemy. He's wasting energy tearing his office apart to locate a predecessor's electronic document when he should be focused on making his own valuable contribution to an important upcoming meeting. If a missing file knocks him so far off his horse, how will he stay astride in a significant crisis?

During the big presentation, Mark fails to assert his capacity, as the new person on the

That approach certainly works on Mark, and he loses professional credibility in the process. When he heatedly rushes to Paul's office against his better judgment, he's like the little brother who runs to daddy to resolve a sibling dispute. Meanwhile, Paul, a direct commander, focuses so blindly on results that he ignores the human dynamics within his team.

To regain his footing, Mark needs to examine his internalized tendencies. He must figure out *why* he gets so rattled, in particular by Nicole. Frequently, the most important conversations we have in business are those we have with ourselves. If he works to make change on the inside, Mark will be better equipped to improve his performance on the job.

WELCOME to the real world, Mark! I know just how you feel.

A colleague sabotaged me in the 1990s, when I was an executive in Europe with Scott Paper, reporting to Albert J. Dunlap (later dubbed “Chainsaw Al”). The saboteur was

cuss Nicole behind closed doors, risks looking like a backstabbing saboteur himself. He, like many people, delegates problems up, without appreciating just how much the boss has on his or her own plate or what the view is like from that position.

Instead of delegating problems up, put yourself in the boss’s shoes.



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a coworker of mine who, by dint of seniority, had his pick of assignments. He chose to run a European division whose factories were already functioning well. That left me to support my division by restructuring other, problem-laden factories. We managed to turn the plants around, and my area began to make a sizable profit.

My colleague, who was used to the spotlight, disliked being outperformed. I remember a particular incident on the corporate jet during Dunlap’s first visit to Europe. When I boarded, I saw my colleague skulk off to the rear of the plane before I took a seat next to the CEO. My colleague apparently had just complained that I had damaged the morale of his division by doing so well. So Dunlap lit into me, saying I’d “destroyed Europe.” I remember him roaring, “We’ll do you in right now, and they’ll never find the bones!” (During a respite in the dressing-down, one of the pilots even slipped me a note asking whether I wanted a parachute.)

Instead of fighting back, I let my consistent results and teamwork on key global initiatives speak for me. Within about nine months, Dunlap no longer held misconceptions about me, and he eventually recruited me to help him with bigger opportunities. But I never did forgive that colleague.

Mark, in contrast, acts impulsively, instead of putting himself in his boss’s shoes. He doesn’t appreciate that Paul has had more experience with Nicole and considers her to be smart and assertive. Mark, the rookie, comes off as unsure of himself and, by asking to dis-

As a CEO, I post my four “rules for boss engagement” on my office door and on internal blog sites. The basic idea is that before you approach me, you should declare your purpose:

1. You’re bringing me news that does not require action. Don’t show up with bad news after 4:00 on a Friday, unless it’s business critical.
2. You want a decision from me. Bring possible solutions to the problem – and your thoughtful recommendation.
3. You want personal advice and counsel from me (not as the boss, and without expecting action on my part – it’s your job to solve the problem).
4. You want to complain about someone. Bring that person along with you, or we won’t have a happy meeting.

I explain that I’m not trying to be arrogant or unresponsive. I care immensely about the people who work for me, but I have a company to run. If you want me to also do your job, don’t expect to be too thrilled with the outcome.

Mark has already made an ill-considered move to approach his boss. Luckily, Paul has kept him on the Millhouse account. Mark can still make things right by procuring inside information from Ian, on his own, and ensuring that his is the last insightful voice Paul hears. He can show that he is above the sniping by then sharing the success of the Millhouse deal with Nicole and making her a future ally. In short, he can manage not just to regain his footing but to make himself a winner.



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MARK FACES the difficult choice of whether to stay in the investment banking division, with its promise of great rewards, while constantly having to watch his back with no apparent support from above.

At first glance, the facts seem to suggest that a return to equity research is best for Mark. He has been politically naive in failing to consider that Nicole's kind gestures might be a front for the threat she feels his appointment poses to her. Furthermore, Mark seems to have accepted the investment banking job without first bothering to learn the divisional culture and norms. Finally, his impetuous complaint to Paul – a hands-off, results-oriented manager who values independence in his people – can hardly make a good impression.

Yet, despite all that evidence in favor of retreat, Mark might not want to act too hastily because, with the right approach, he could negotiate a relationship with Nicole on the Millhouse project that would position him well. But first he needs to get answers to a few key questions. Is Nicole a saboteur to the core, or

some empathy by saying, "Listen, Nicole, I didn't understand the way people do things here, so let's back up and reassess. I was truly surprised at your display of anger. I want to understand how my being hired affected you. I want to work with you because I think I can learn from you, as you can from me."

If Mark finds Nicole is responsive to this kind of gesture, he should next negotiate with her their roles on the Millhouse project, openly acknowledging the value of both his long-standing relationship with Ian and Nicole's extensive experience at CliffBank. Only when they've agreed on appropriate roles should Mark, still asserting his place as the primary liaison to Millhouse, invite her to the meeting with Ian. After that meeting, assuming it goes well, Mark and Nicole need to negotiate again about how to proceed.

Of course, civil attempts at reconciliation and collaboration may reveal that Nicole really cannot be trusted. Nevertheless, Mark retains his access to and friendship with Ian. He can remind Ian that he is the point person at CliffBank and ask his old friend to respect

Is sabotage peculiar to Nicole, or is it emblematic of the broader culture in the division?

is Mark's imminent threat to her star status driving situation-specific behavior? Is sabotage peculiar to Nicole, or is it emblematic of the broader culture in this division? Does Paul's emphasis on results truly signal his willingness to tolerate pursuit of those results by any means necessary? Depending on what Mark discovers, he may decide either to work with Nicole and foster that relationship or to take control and assert his influence with Ian in order to land the Millhouse account.

An attempt to collaborate with Nicole might begin with Mark's engaging her directly without being flippant or antagonistic. Over drinks after work, for example, he could try to show

and reinforce that. Regarding Nicole specifically, Mark might say, "Please don't talk to her. If she persists in trying to communicate with you, I'd appreciate your letting me know."

Whatever Mark ultimately decides, his is a cautionary tale. You must scope out the culture of a group you are joining in sufficient depth to understand what it takes to negotiate relationships there and to establish your position as a valued member. 

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