Jealousy: Saving your business from a Shakespearean tragedy

IESE's José Ramón Pin and Guido Stein offer advice for executives on how to manage jealousy before it ends up destroying people.

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"But jealous for they're jealous. 'Tis a monster Begot upon itself, born on itself." This line from Shakespeare's *Othello* perfectly captures the insidious nature of jealousy: There doesn't need to be any rhyme or reason; jealous people just are, and the negative emotion feeds upon itself.

In the play, Othello is so consumed by false insinuations about his wife's infidelity made up by his friend, Iago — who is himself jealous — that he ends up smothering her in a fit of jealous rage before killing himself.

Workplace jealousy will hopefully never reach the heights of this tragedy, but most of us have experienced some form of jealousy at work, either from a boss, coworkers, subordinates, customers, suppliers or shareholders.

Using Othello as a reference, IESE's José Ramón Pin and Guido Stein analyze this pathological feeling and offer some advice on how to manage it.

Distribution of roles

Any company can have executives and employees whose desire for power or professional success leads them to act out of jealousy. Among people who lack maturity or self-esteem, jealousy often shapes their behavior.

Some visible signs of "Othello bosses" include:

- overly criticizing the actions of subordinates in order to discredit them
- excluding subordinates from important meetings
- saddling them with difficult projects and then sabotaging their efforts by not giving them any resources, to ensure they make mistakes
- firing them without any clear, logical reason

"Othello bosses" often beget more "Othello bosses" or "Othello behavior" by sowing mistrust throughout the company. This becomes more palpable as you climb the corporate ladder.

Such tragedies almost always have an instigator. In Shakespeare's play, it is Iago who makes Othello believe his wife is having an affair with the up-and-coming soldier, Cassio, in order to get rid of him.
The "Iago employee" in the workplace is someone who is familiar enough with the boss's weaknesses and insecurities that they can exercise undue influence over him or her. Some executives also like to keep an "Iago" around as backup.

With such characters in place, the plot usually unfolds like this: The boss picks a subordinate for a job, and when that person excels, the boss fears that subordinate will undermine his or her own success. All it takes is for one peer to stir up conflict, and then disaster strikes.

How to handle jealousy

Managing jealousy is a challenge. Executives must be on the lookout for the warning signs — either in others or in themselves — and nip them in the bud.

Some advice for dealing with jealousy includes:

- avoid situations that may be construed as unfair, arbitrary or favoritism
- remain alert to possible indicators of jealousy
- confront the person involved as soon as the signs arise
- address the problem in a professional manner

The dynamics of jealousy must be reversed early on to avoid interpersonal conflict reaching a point of no return.

The best move for someone in the "Cassio" role when they start to note the signs is to curb suspicions by recognizing and supporting the boss's competencies and successes.

The subordinate must also perform a self-analysis to assess his or her own level of

responsibility in stirring up jealous feelings, and take appropriate measures.

A good mentor or coach can help, but escalating the conflict tends to be the wrong solution. If the situation cannot be turned around, sometimes the only option is separation, i.e., requesting a transfer or leaving the company.

The best remedies

Humility and generosity are very effective for preventing jealousy. The former, which requires self-knowledge and awareness of one's own limitations, is increasingly important for leadership in complex global organizations.

Humble executives are immune to jealousy and are proud of the successes of their peers, which is why they provide extraordinary support in developing the talent of their subordinates.

But the virtue of humility shouldn't be exclusive to managers: It must be present in all members of the organization, as it encourages the realism necessary for decision-making. Senior managers need to develop leaders who embody this virtue.

Generosity provides the moral foundations by setting good examples for employees, which in turn earns their respect and confidence. After all, true leadership is less about latitude and more about attitude.

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