

Help! Save My Career!

by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru

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Dear Guru Don:

I made a mistake with senior management, and now I don't know what to do. I have been identified as "a gossip," which I think is totally unfair. My question is: How do I get my reputation back?

Here's the story: Our company was acquired recently. I was offered a nice position just two steps below our new boss, the incoming VP level guy. My immediate boss is a nice fellow, smart, fair, and I do not have any problems there. I have known him for years. But now I have a big problem with the new guy, the one person in charge of the reorg and integration. I fear that my career is in real jeopardy.

The whole situation happened two weeks ago. I believe it is nobody's fault, but just bad circumstances. I inadvertently became the messenger for some bad news, and there was a reaction involving several other people.

As directed by the new boss, I was charged to gather information about the specs of our systems, to support integration planning. In the process, I guess I shared with one of my old techie buddies the information I learned from the new VP that his software might be retired soon. My buddy has put many years into developing this system, and I guess the news stressed him out.

You can imagine my shock when I was soon reading an e-mail to the VP, that I was cc'd on, telling that I gave such and such information, and it should be wrong, because the system in question is useful, and so on. This heated up the whole situation, with many people coming in with opinions.

The boss's response was two short sentences addressed to the whole team, basically saying, "Stop whining. It is not a subject for further discussion." And then he added, I think to me, that he will no longer share with the team any sensitive information, and said the team should be focused on the tasks at hand and not on spreading "rumors."

I tried apologizing to the VP through e-mail, to explain what happened, but he never replied. He is in a different physical location, and I don't happen to see him everyday. I used to have direct access to him, and we discussed many exciting plans for the new company. But just today I received an email about a different matter, telling me that I have to go through my immediate manager for everything.

How do I rebuild my damaged relationship with my top boss? There are still many staffing decisions being made, and I feel I am at great risk.

Sign me,

Techie in Trouble

Dear T-N-T:

You are right that this is a potentially explosive situation. One of the biggest problems in any organization is the control and management of information. Many career problems are created by mishandling information, giving sensitive info to the wrong people, or even to the right people at the wrong time.

Everyone knows to be careful with salary data, or with a company's succession plans, but strategy information is also very sensitive--both externally *and internally*. Whether you want to admit it or not, you gave strategy info to a work team directly impacted by that strategy. That is careless, and now you are paying the price.

You seem to be surprised by this turn of events, but to me everything that happened was entirely predictable. I have three pieces of advice for you:

Number One: Own your mistake. You need to be much more careful with information. Engineers might view sharing of data as good practice, but managers and executives are much more circumspect. As your career advances, you have to make a shift in what you share with others. You call your problem a "situation" and "circumstances" and similar language that implies you are blameless. Learn to say, to yourself especially, "I made a mistake." That's your first step to making sure you don't make this particular mistake again.

Number Two: Learn where your allegiance lies. When you were selected to be an insider on the integration planning, *all your allegiance should have shifted to the new management vision*. Your loyalty should have shifted totally over to the new regime. Your old buddies should never have taken precedence over fostering a smooth integration process.

Number Three: Ask your immediate boss for a sit-down with the top boss. Your email apology was either ignored or disbelieved. Since you have good relations with your boss, he may back you for this event. Then, apologize in person, one time, and promise it won't happen again. Then, as the Romans used to say, *facta, non verba*. Let your actions speak louder than your words. You can only rebuild your reputation by consistently demonstrating that you understand your mistake, and by not repeating it, ever.

If your boss won't facilitate this meeting, let your prior email be the last word on this topic.

But just to be safe I'd be updating my resume if I were you.

My best wishes for your continued success.

Two Questions in This Column, #2:

Dear Guru Don:

I feel that I'm going through a career crisis. I have bachelor's degree in accounting. Right after college I worked for two years as an accountant then six as an auditor. Right after I passed my CPA exam, I got laid off.

This layoff impacted my self-esteem and career path. I decided to go for a certificate in programming, and then found a job as a programmer analyst. I've been in the same position for the past ten years with no advancement. I'm 42 and don't have a passion for programming anymore. I want to go back to accounting because:

1. I am burned out on learning so many programming languages and updates.
2. The outsourcing of IT jobs makes my future look somewhat bleak.
3. Most programming jobs are contracting instead of full time.

Is it impossible to go back to accounting? I haven't been in the market for the past 10 years, but I'd really like to look for an accounting job. Is this a reasonable goal? What should I do?

Sign me,

Maria in Cubicle 12-G

Dear Maria:

Go for it! Accounting is waiting for you, but you'll have to use a little strategy to get where you want to go. For one thing, if you've skipped ten years of continuing education, you'll probably have to retake your CPA exams, but maybe not right away. First you have to break out of programming and back into the some area in the accounting arena.

There is a career management concept called "bouncing," and that is what you must do. Think of using a Pogo stick to advance your career. Instead of plodding along, you need to bounce along, perhaps starting as a bookkeeper, then returning to public accounting as a clerk, then passing your CPA exams again, and then serving as a CPA. The key is that you may need to switch employers several times in order to get where you belong. Why? People who see you as a bookkeeping clerk are never going to see you as a certified accountant. And you can't afford to get stuck again for another ten years! This is the same technique used by mothers returning to the workforce after childcare, and prisoners released after serving their debts to society, which makes for an odd juxtaposition.

To break into bookkeeping, or some other non-CPA form of financial services, you'll need to bypass the whole applying-for-a-posted-opening type of job search. You need to learn how to network your way into an opportunity, which will be covered in greater

detail in next month's column (so you'll have to fly USAirways again soon!). See you next month!

My best wishes for your continued success,

Donald Asher

Send your career emergency to [don@donaldasher.com](mailto:don@donaldasher.com), and watch this space for Asher's response.

BIO: Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker on careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why* (named Business Book of the Year 2008 by national career columnist Joyce Lain Kennedy). Asher speaks over 100 days a year from coast to coast, to college and corporate audiences. He is eager to hear your career emergency.