

WE WOMEN'S ENTERPRISE

BUSINESS NEWS FOR WOMEN

MARCH 1995



CAREER KILLERS

EMPLOYEES CAN CAUSE THEIR OWN DEMISE

BY KARYL INNIS, CHAIRMAN AND CEO OF THE INNIS COMPANY

When the independent bank where Barbara worked as a marketing manager was sold, she was both excited and nervous. She liked the prestige and career opportunities that came with the new organization, but she wondered if she would survive the change.

Barbara sought advice from peers as well as her human resources department. She was counseled — "Sit tight. Hang on and hang back. They'll sift this out and let you know."

Barbara hung back, all right. She thought of every assignment as "the proving ground," and spent more time fretting than performing. A word of criticism from the new management sent her into a tailspin. She retreated to her office fearful that someone would come to tell her that she did not have a place on the new team. And someone did.

HOMICIDE OR SUICIDE?

Barbara probably did not have to lose her job. She possessed the very skills and talents that made the acquisition so appealing in the first place. But Barbara, like thousands of other employees, chose the wrong course of action to survive the "sift and sort" process that is a natural step in redefining a new organization. She alternated between being fearful and passive, defensive and aloof. She did not know how to show that she deserved one of the coveted management slots on the new organization chart.

CHANGE IS A CONSTANT

"Can I keep my job?" is the plaintive cry heard most often by employees in companies merging, downsizing ... changing.

Employees like Barbara are right to be nervous — a significant number of employees are soon out on the street after corporate changes are announced. In a recent *US News & World Report*, it was suggested for each new manager at the top — as many as six more people might lose their job. Two out of three U.S. companies are expected to experience a major corporate change before the year 2000. In fact, about 70 percent of major U.S. corporations have been restructured in the past year.

PERSONAL CAREER MANAGEMENT

Talented, but shell-shocked, employees can become practically comatose at a time when their career paths are at a major fork in the road. Many swing back and forth between what appears to be the safest route — keeping a low profile and trying to fit in — and "acting out" their conflicting emotions through aggressive behaviors and defensive attitudes. "We're not just talking here about middle managers, or just women, or the fresh MBAs," explains John Alston, president of The Innis Company. "Even very successful senior executives in very successful companies flounder when their organization is merged or acquired. It's a human reaction that affects managers of all abilities and at all levels."

THE CAREER KILLERS

After observing the struggles of hundreds of employees at companies going through significant corporate change, we have found that those who do not "make the cut" often have made a mistake — a career killer of a mistake.

CAREER KILLER NO. 1: PERFORMANCE SLIPS.

Even though the days feel more hectic and stressful, research shows that productivity is cut in half following a major change in an organization.

While the new leadership assumes everyone knows "it's business as usual," workers often freeze in their tracks — like deer caught in the headlights — and wait to be told to proceed. Most

people aren't aware that their output is dwindling because it "takes so much longer to get things done."

While it doesn't feel like it, less is getting done and the new management sees passive people, not taking responsibility.

CAREER KILLER NO. 2: PERSONAL "MARKET" VALUE IS UNDEFINED.

Sometimes employees believe the power of their previous positions will automatically carry them into the new organization chart. "I've been CFO here for 25 years. Of course, they'll want me to stay."

In our outplacement practice we've noticed that unemployed managers are frequently those who cannot describe how their experience, skills and talents can help the new organization be successful. They have trouble relating their work, their contributions, to the overall goal/mission of the organization. They know their job title and salary but can't quantify their contribution in a way that "speaks" to the new management.

CAREER KILLER NO. 3: FAIL TO MAKE NEW FRIENDS.

Employees in an acquired company or "reorganized" department often act like vanquished soldiers. They refuse to do internal networking. They view the new management as "the Huns," and they hold themselves separate instead of trying to become acquainted with and part of the new team. They wait to be asked to lunch or coffee — they fail to make new friends.

CAREER KILLER NO. 4: CLING TO OLD HABITS AND WAYS OF THINKING.

Employees in the unemployment lines are still humming the old tunes: "We've always done it this way"; or "We'd never do that."

Employees sentence themselves to doom if they continue to use language like "our way" and "your way" and "we've always" and "we would never do it that way" during

the transition. Presenting lengthy historical perspectives of why things are the way they are will not make one a prime candidate for a new position.

It's hard to abandon loyalty to an organization but when the new logo goes up the old organization is gone. Every company has its own culture and traditions and it is up to the employee to identify how the old and new are different.

CAREER KILLER NO. 5: BELIEVE THE SELECTION AND EVALUATION PROCESS IS OBJECTIVE.

Einstein said, "What you see depends upon where you're standing." And so it is for new management. All they know is what they see *now*.

Objective and fair are not the same thing. While many employees believe that their past reputation, skills and experience should be obvious proof of their worth, the fact is that personal chemistry and behavior observed during the change process will carry far more weight in the evaluation process than past performance reviews.

SUMMARY

If new leadership is headed to the corner office of your company, your first thought may be: "Will I keep my job?" You can if you play your cards right. Don't commit career suicide. Avoiding these common mistakes made by people who now have a pink slip for their scrapbook are the first steps in assuring continued tenure.

BIO FILE:

Karyl Innis, owner and chief executive officer of The Innis Company, is considered a pioneer in program development for the human side of organizational downsizing, and is a nationally known expert in outplacement and career management. A certified woman-owned business, The Innis Company provides outplacement and career counseling for the Fortune 1000 and private companies across the country. Karyl Innis can be reached at (214) 702-9484.