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CAREER COUCH

Betrayed by a Colleague

By MATT VILLANO

Q. You told a co-worker how much you earn, and now she is trying to use the information to get a raise. You fear your job is in jeopardy. What can you do?

A. Talking about workplace secrets is not the best strategy for career advancement, but in most cases, without other documented indiscretions in your file, you are not likely to lose your job because of it.

So don't panic. Paul Thornton, president of Be the Leader Associates, a consulting firm in Chicopee, Mass., said escalating the situation could permanently tarnish your career. "You're already in a tough spot that probably has damaged your credibility," he said. "If you get angry and upset and you start yelling and screaming," it will only make matters worse.

Q. Why would a co-worker betray your confidence?

A. It's no secret that today's workplace is a competitive environment. Susan Shapiro Barash, professor of gender studies at Marymount Manhattan College in New York, says this atmosphere drives many employees to undermine others in an attempt to get ahead. She said the problem was particularly acute when female

employees competed against each other, but noted that male employees exhibited cutthroat tendencies as well.

"The thinking is, 'If I make you into less, I'll be more,' " said Ms. Shapiro Barash, author of "Tripping the Prom Queen: The Truth About Women and Rivalry" (St. Martin's Press, 2006). "It's never really safe to assume that when you tell someone something in confidence it will remain under wraps."

People sometimes believe they are acting selflessly when they betray others. Greg Suddreth, head of the business architecture practice of the STA Group, a technology solutions company in Chicago, said employees might act out of concern for the firm or the well-being of an employee. "In these cases, employees are looking to the supposed wisdom and experience of someone like the boss," he said.

Q. What kind of information should you keep to yourself?

A. Any information that you're not prepared to share with everyone in the office probably should not be shared with anyone.

For starters, Eva Har-Even, senior executive coach with WJM Associates, an organizational consulting firm in New York, said employees should stay mum about intraoffice love affairs, potential job interviews, salary issues, client relations disasters and personal feelings toward the boss.

Nicole Wool, director of public relations at Rousso/Fisher Public Relations in Los Angeles, learned this lesson firsthand early in her career, as an attorney in a law firm. One morning, Ms. Wool confided to a colleague that she was thinking of quitting. That afternoon, Ms. Wool learned that the colleague had informed the boss of Ms. Wool's plans.

"I was absolutely stunned to say the least," Ms. Wool said. "I felt so betrayed. Should I have known better? Probably. But I really thought she could be trusted."

Ms. Wool left the firm several months later.

Q. Is it wise to confront a backstabbing colleague?

A. Sitting down to work things out is a fine idea if you're comfortable with it, said Carly Drum, managing director at Drum Associates, an executive search firm in New York. "The sooner you figure out what motivated the person to behave the way they did, the sooner the two of you can come up with a solution," she said.

In this case, though, since your colleague already has betrayed your trust, airing your feelings may only open you up to additional attacks.

Suzanne Bates, president of Bates Communications, a management consulting firm in Wellesley, Mass., said that a colleague who stabbed you in the back once was unlikely to change his or her ways after a simple heart-to-heart.

"Once a backstabber, always a backstabber," said Ms. Bates, author of "Speak Like a C.E.O." (McGraw Hill, 2005). "You may think that open communication will get you someplace and smooth things over, but the truth is that you probably aren't going to teach them anything."

Q. If your boss calls you on the carpet, how should you respond?

A. Don't deny it. Loren Ekroth, an independent consultant in Las Vegas and founder of Better Conversations, an e-mail newsletter, said employees should admit that they erred, apologize and make clear that such indiscretions were not standard operating procedure.

"Just be honest," Mr. Ekroth said. "Most bosses like to find solutions, and admitting fault gives you the opportunity to be forgiven."

Still, not every boss will be forgiving. Ms. Shapiro Barash said that some would bristle at the notion of employees sharing secrets and would come down hard on you for trading gossip in the first place.

Q. Can you be fired for being indiscreet about sensitive issues?

A. Penny Morey, managing director of human capital services with CBIZ, a business services firm in Cleveland, said that even if a company made employees sign a nondisclosure agreement covering information-sharing inside the firm, co-

workers still had rights to discuss certain issues under the National Labor Relations Act.

Specifically, this law protects an employee's right to discuss "wages, hours and other terms and conditions of employment" with others in the workplace to protect against discrimination.

"There's no question that sharing this kind of information is legal," Ms. Morey said. "Whether you feel comfortable entrusting your co-workers with it is up to you."