

Upfront

Vengeance, Interrupted **How organizations can inspire reconciliation instead of revenge**

By Alana Conner Snibbe

Stanford Social Innovation Review
Winter 2007

Copyright © 2007 by Leland Stanford Jr. University
All Rights Reserved



"Jack, can you prove that Harrison stabbed you in the back?"

Vengeance, Interrupted

How organizations can inspire reconciliation instead of revenge

Wendy Kroy (not her real name) is an executive assistant at a venture capital firm in Silicon Valley. She is also author of the blog "Sand Hill Slave." (Sand Hill is a road in Menlo Park, Calif., that is home to the largest concentration of venture capital firms in the world.) Kroy's boss tends to read his e-mail and talk on the phone at the same time. On many occasions, this multitasking has led him to open e-mail attachments with viruses, which wreck his computer. He then pesters Kroy to fix his computer.

Fed up with her boss's thoughtlessness, Kroy recently decided to get revenge. "I subscribed his work e-mail address to multiple porn sites," she writes in an e-mail. "I bookmarked several bestiality sites on his computer at work as well." Embarrassed by the influx of pornographic spam, Kroy's

boss ferried his computer to the IT department himself, rather than asking her to do it for him.

Workplace revenge is common, but it need not be, reports a recent article in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* (vol. 91, no. 3). When workplaces have fair and just procedures, wronged employees are less likely to exact revenge and more likely to offer forgiveness and reconciliation, says lead author Karl Aquino of the Sauder School of Business at the University of British Columbia. The article's other authors were Thomas M. Tripp of Washington State University Vancouver and Robert J. Bies of Georgetown University.

To explore how employees' perceptions of organizational justice affect their reactions to offenses, the authors first asked 257 public utility employees

to retell their tales of workplace woe. These employees also rated the fairness of their employers' policies for evaluating, promoting, paying, disciplining, and terminating employees. The results were clear: When worker bees felt that their place of business was not just, they were more likely to sting when upset. The authors found similar results in an experiment involving 148 MBA students.

As the name of her blog indicates, Kroy finds her workplace quite unjust. "The partners think they are gods. ... They definitely don't follow the 'Golden Rule' on how to treat people," she writes. And unlike many companies, "VC firms tend to stay small, and more often than not the HR function is delegated to an office manager who is not very qualified or is very power hungry and wants things his or her way," she adds.

Aquino suggests several steps that Kroy's boss and other leaders can follow to avoid their employees' wrath. The first is to be more forgiving and conciliatory themselves. "People hardly ever talk about forgiveness and reconciliation in business school," he notes. "They like the ideas, but they don't understand [these ideas'] place in organizations where they're striving to succeed." But anger and undercutting are debilitating both to individuals and to organizations. By modeling forgiveness and reconciliation, leaders set the tone for a more peaceful and harmonious workplace.

A second step toward a vendetta-free workplace is to make sure that procedures are fair and fairly enforced. "When people believe that laws are enacted fairly, they are less likely to take the law into their own hands," says Aquino. "It's when you live in places with corrupt police that you get the Mafia." —A.C.S.