

## Who Betrays One Master

*Often, the difference between the employed and the unemployed is—well, not much.*

**By Stephen Balzac**

**A**nervous looking man in a suit slips furtively through the streets of an unnamed city. He comes to an office building and, checking to make sure that he isn't being watched, slips inside. There, another man greets him.

"Do you have the plans?" the second man asks.

"Do you have the money?" replies the first.

Perhaps they haggle for a moment, but then the second man hands over the money and the first man hands over an envelope. The second man glances into the envelope.

"I see you kept your word."

"You earned it," replies the first man as he turns to leave.

"No," says the second, as he pulls a gun and shoots the first man, "I bought it."

"I betrayed my company for you! I proved my loyalty," gasps the first man, as he falls to the floor.

The second man looks down at the body on the floor and says, "The man who betrays one master will assuredly betray another."

If this scene sounds familiar, it probably is. Some variation of it appears in hundreds of movies, from James Bond to WWII action films to fantasy adventure. The trope is a simple one: a man betrays his country, company, organization, or teacher. The person to whom he sells out reaps the rewards, but never believes the traitor's protestations of loyalty to his new masters. Eventually, it ends badly for the traitor.

Now, if this scenario were only a work of fiction, there would be little more to say. Unfortunately, the fictional part is the end: in real life the disloyal person is rewarded and given every opportunity to betray his new masters.

I was recently asked the question, "What is the best way to convince someone to leave their current employer and join my company?"

My response was, "Why?"

"We don't want to hire anyone unemployed."

"Why not?"

"Employed people are harder workers, more dedicated, and more loyal. If someone is unemployed, well, there's probably a reason, you know."

Right. Let's take a look at this statement and see if it actually holds up. We'll start with the final piece, that there's probably a reason someone is unemployed.

In fact, there is a reason. It's called a recession. Now, in normal economic times, if someone is unemployed for any significant length of time, it is frequently quite reasonable to suspect that it has something to do with that specific person. This is not a normal time. The desire to blame the person who is unemployed, though, hides a more subtle belief: that there is something fundamentally different between the person speaking and person without a job. If a loyal, dedicated, highly skilled, hard-working employee could lose their job and not be able to quickly find a new one, then so could the speaker. That is quite upsetting, and it's easier to blame the unemployed.

As F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "The rich are different from the rest of us."

As Ernest Hemmingway replied, "Yes, they have more money."

The only difference between the employed person and the unemployed person is that the former has a job. Ignoring that cuts you off from a huge pool of potential talent.

Next, let's unpack the statements about "dedication" and "harder workers."

Businesses like to hire, and promote, people with perfect records. Terms like "dedication" and "hard worker," are all too often used to mean "perfect record." Gaps in the resume? Bad. Failed project? Bad. Any hint of mistake or imperfection? Bad. People who are unemployed do not have perfect records.

The problem, however, with perfect records is that they're usually perfect for a reason: the person in question never really challenged themselves. They played it safe. While that

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may sound good on paper, these same people are also the least able to cope when something unexpected does go wrong.

I was once called in to work with a manager who had a stellar track record, until something went wrong. He couldn't cope. He kept telling me, "I'm not the sort of manager who allows something like that to happen."

Well, something "like that" obviously was happening. The resulting disconnect between his (mis)perception of himself and reality was overwhelming. The fellow was so stressed out that he couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, and couldn't think straight. While many of us might like to lose a few pounds, his method was not the way to do it. The fact that he had never failed meant that he had no resilience. The mere possibility of failure was enough to send him into panic and make the odds of failure more likely. Yes, we did turn things around, and he's a much more capable manager now than he ever was before.

When you want someone to embark on a risky project or take bold, decisive action, don't look to the person with the perfect record who has never failed. If they haven't taken risks or been bold before, they won't change just for you.

As Michael Jordan once said, "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot—and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."

Who would you rather have working for you? The person with the perfect record, or the person who is the equivalent of Michael Jordan?

Finally, let's look at this whole question of loyalty. There are a number of reasons why it may be possible to recruit apparently loyal employees away from a company. There are also many ways to prevent it from happening to you, as I discussed in "*Communicating With Retention in Mind*," in the February 2010 issue of the *Journal*.

Fundamentally, a person can be most easily dislodged from a company when they don't feel appreciated, when they don't feel their work matters, when the environment they are in makes them feel incompetent, or when they don't feel connected to the team. So, if you're looking for someone

who is basically unhappy in their job, then poaching from another company might make sense. It's certainly true that there are some good people who can be found that way.

But we also have to ask, "Why? Why does this person feel unappreciated? Why do they not feel their work matters? Why do they feel incompetent at their company? Why don't they feel connected to the team?"

Is it the person or is it the company? And how will you know? I've found that a surprising number of very talented and skilled people will remain loyal to a company even when conditions are poor, management is weak, and they are not really all that happy.

Now, let me be clear: if we're looking at recruiting people from a company that's in trouble and in danger of going under, that's a very different situation. In that case, the forces that hold someone in the company are rapidly disintegrating. It's when we're trying to pull people away from a reasonably stable environment that loyalty really comes into play.

Consider how often people take the job with lower pay or a more annoying commute in order to pursue a dream or work for a company they believe in. When you try to lure someone away from a company with promises of higher pay or any of the usual prizes and bonuses, are you giving them something to believe in? Or are

you just hiring mercenaries? In the end, the people you are most likely to get are those who are most loosely attached to their current job, or who can be lured away by those things that your competitors can use to lure them away from you: in other words, you're looking at the least loyal.

"But wait," I hear you cry. "Isn't it worth it to hire those amazing people who kept their jobs through the recession? Don't those people have some ineffable, awesome, amazing talent that makes them so valuable that they didn't get laid off?"

Maybe. Or maybe they just got lucky. They were in the right place at the right time, or at least not in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But don't people make their own luck? To a degree, yes. But less so than we'd like to think. To give a fairly close analogy, each year MIT receives approximately 17,000 applicants for approximately 1,000 slots. While some of those

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17,000 are simply not qualified, conservatively that still leaves approximately 13,000 fully qualified applicants. The difference between the 1,000 who get in and the 12,000 qualified candidates who don't? The 1,000 received admissions letters. The others received rejection letters. Factors as subtle as whether the sun was shining when a particular file was reviewed or how recently someone on the admissions committee had a cup of coffee can all influence the result. In other words, luck.

Now, perhaps you don't like the term "luck." That's fine. Let's call it what it really is: those factors in the world that you simply cannot control. Many of us don't like to acknowledge that such factors exist, but the world doesn't actually care about our feelings on the matter. When I was a competitive fencer, learning to cope with factors outside our control was part of the game. Perhaps the day of the competition dawns hot and humid, and you don't deal well with the heat. On the other hand, perhaps you're a morning person and your division is called for 8 a.m. Or perhaps your first bout is against the one person who can beat you and you get eliminated. If you'd drawn that person later, you might place second; or, perhaps they'd be eliminated before they faced you. Making judgments implicitly based on those random factors blinds us to potential opportunities.

But so what? It doesn't really do any harm to hire people away from another company, and it may get some good

people. Again, we have to think about that. When the hiring process is biased toward the least loyal people, what sort of mindset are you likely to get at your company? Recognize that behaviors that are rewarded are repeated. What sort of culture are you creating? One that rewards loyalty or one that rewards disloyalty?

At one company, management went through some truly amazing contortions to hire a specific, highly skilled engineer away from the competition. In a scene surprisingly

like the one with which I opened this article, he kept asking for more and they kept giving it to him. Eventually, he accepted the job. In three months, he was gone, and not because he was shot for betraying his former masters. That part only happens in the movies.

On the flip side, now, consider the unemployed person who is actively looking for a job. Here is someone who is failing, getting up, and trying again. Here is someone who is able to maintain an optimistic attitude in the face of constant rejection. Here is someone who is highly likely to feel a great sense of loyalty to the company willing to take a chance on her.

Which employee would you rather have?

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