

Is An Incompetent Employee Spreading a Virus Throughout Your Organization? Here's What to Do About It.

The incompetent employee is often the "security blanket" of the seemingly all-powerful CEO.

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CEOs are not told the truth about the most vital corporate issues. The reason is simple: No employee wants to be the messenger who's shot. Unfortunately, there is a high price to keeping the truth from the CEO — errors spread like a virus in the corporate body. One of the most malignant viruses is the high-placed, incompetent executive who leads a charmed life.

Don't cross an incompetent employee

A former client recently said to me, "beware of crossing an incompetent employee; every such person has survived because he fulfills a purpose for someone else."

This comment caused me to reflect on the underlying reasons for a CEO to protect an employee who's widely known to be incompetent at best and harmful at worst.

One reason is obvious — a dirty secret. For example, the incompetent employee might have knowledge of financial misdeeds. Explicitly or implicitly, there might

be a payoff for silence. If the person is capable of holding that leverage over their CEO, what could they do to you?

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The incompetent employee might be the CEO's "security blanket"

A few years ago, I was advising a distressed company. One member of the [executive team](#) was clearly not equipped for his position. I asked his colleague on the executive team if he had addressed the problem with the CEO. The colleague became agitated and responded that he had raised the issue but the CEO had responded with such hostility that he feared returning to the subject.

Confident of my relationship with the CEO, I decided to take the bull by the horns. I was polite but firm and, I thought, persuasive. The CEO listened intently and assured me he would consider taking action. As I was leaving his office, the executive in question entered and asked if he could bring the CEO lunch. When I saw the CEO's face, I knew my mission had failed. He was suddenly more relaxed and comfortable. The CEO did not need his employee to bring him lunch, but he needed him for comfort and security. The executive had been with him for years, was dedicated to him, was totally reliant on him, and the executive was safety.

Later I extrapolated from this incident, and others I have observed, another reason why many incompetent executives are protected by CEOs. These executives have no power base in the company — no one respects them. An executive who is totally beholden to their patron will always do their bidding, thereby providing a reliable source of support and predictability for their boss.

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The benefit to the CEO is a cancer to the organization

The benefit the executive provides, however, is a cancer to the organization: The incompetent officer serves the CEO, not the company. The CEO will give the employee latitude and perks denied to others. This disparate treatment and these inconsistent standards undermine trust among other employees — trust that’s vital if they’re expected to perform to their highest potential.

According to a Harvard Business Review article by Ron Ashkenas, subordinates respond with fear and sycophancy “if the [boss is insecure or capricious.](#)” To keep the executive happy, the CEO might even allow them to meddle in areas that are outside their nominal skill sets. Out of self-preservation, other employees fear challenging the executive or confronting the CEO, so the virus spreads throughout the organization.

CEOs tend to blame external factors for their failures, such as a confluence of bad luck (the “perfect storm”), unreasonable lenders, the economy and so on (I have heard them all). But CEOs should recognize that often the fault lies not in the stars [but in themselves.](#) This is a hard message for them to accept, but the success of a company depends on the CEO’s willingness to act responsibly.

A CEO can overcome the problem

It is difficult for human beings to recognize their faults and weaknesses. Identifying the “security blanket” issue and taking the necessary steps is a challenge for a CEO. But there are clear indicators of problems if the CEO is not willingly blind: The “security blanket” employee will lack the respect of their peers and those with whom they interact.

Let’s go deeper. What about a CEO who lacks even this [self-awareness](#) and ignores the signs? Although [personal growth](#) would be ideal, it is not a programmatic solution. I suggest that the solution might be found by addressing the root of the

problem — the isolation and insecurity of the CEO. The underlying problem can be overcome by having a trusted sounding board.

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An active, independent board would be best, but a confident advisor could fill the role. As Bill George explains in his article “Why Leaders Lose Their Way,” “[Reliable mentors](#) are entirely honest and straight with us, defining reality and developing action plans.” Neither the board nor the advisor should be employees or “yes men.” They need to tell the CEO what they will not tolerate their employees to say, and what they hide from themselves.

At the end of the day, however, no method will succeed unless the CEO is committed to the ultimate good of the company and possesses at least a modicum of self-awareness. The CEO must listen to their sounding board, examine their motivations and fears frankly, and then take the steps necessary to combat the virus lurking in their moldy security blanket.

Read the original article at [entrepreneur.com](#).