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Relationships

Work: When your protégé is a little too good

How to manage an ambitious employee who is gunning for your job.

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In 1999, Citigroup CEO Sandy Weill pushed his protégé Jamie Dimon out of the company. The two had shared a successful father-son dynamic for years. People wanted to know the cause of the split. Speculation was rampant. Citigroup's stock price fell.

This January, Weill finally fessed up to *The New York Times*. "The problem was, in 1999 [Dimon] wanted to be CEO and I didn't want to retire," Weill said. He felt threatened, so he sent his protégé packing—and lived to regret it. Dimon went on to become the celebrated head of Citi's arch rival, JPMorgan Chase.

So what is the right thing to do if you think one of your underlings is vying for your position? While it's normal to feel threatened, you need to make a rational and honest assessment: Is the employee displaying a healthy sense of ambition that can be harnessed to help the company, or is his ambition dangerous to your job and the health of your organization? If you determine it's the latter, it's important to act, says Paul Babiak, president of consulting firm HRBackOffice and co-author of *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work*. "If someone wants to unseat you, he will raise doubts about your competence and loyalty."

To protect yourself, you'll need to carefully manage your reputation. Babiak says leaders can do this by keeping meticulous records and maintaining confidentiality so overly ambitious underlings won't have ammunition against them. And don't whine. If your job is in danger from subordinate sabotage, the people above you will stay onside if you present yourself as competent and confident.

The good news is that, in most cases, having an employee with eyes on your job is a positive thing,

providing she has the patience to wait. That's been the experience so far for Ian Caunt, CEO of the workplace training company CCI Learning Solutions, based in Langely, B.C. Recently, one of Caunt's 17 employees made it very clear he wants Caunt's job. The CEO isn't troubled by his executive's ambition, and in fact, he says the situation is making his business stronger by forcing them to have conversations about the future of the company that are tempting to put off, like succession planning and long-term growth.

But Caunt isn't ready to give up his job just yet. Instead, with the help of Cissy Pau of Clear HR Consulting, and with his employee's patient involvement, Caunt will prepare his executive to be CEO. Caunt says the employee's expertise in finances puts the company in a good position to grow.

Transparent communication is the key to capitalizing on the ambition of subordinates, says Pau. Employees need to be open about their motivations and goals. During a frank discussion, the manager should explain what areas the employee needs to work on to facilitate her advancement, as well as sharing his own goals to help give a sense of a time frame when the position might be available. Given all the information, the employee or executive might choose to move on, says Ralph Shedletsky, chief operating officer of Knightsbridge, an executive recruitment and human-resources company located in Toronto. In other cases, the employee may not have the skill set for the job he's aiming for, and the manager can help guide him to a career path that better suits his abilities.

If the employee looks like she could be capable of moving into your role in the future, the best thing for you to do, according to Shedletsky, is to offer training. It's a principle that holds true no matter what the level of management, he says. Training a potential usurper may seem counterintuitive, like Samson handing out scissors, but it's actually beneficial for all involved, Shedletsky says. The company has a more capable employee and a succession plan in place; you don't want to be so indispensable that you feel trapped. Not to mention, training employees is a manager's job. "Development looks good on you as a manager," Babiak says.

As you take control of the situation, you'll be less likely to eliminate an employee for the wrong reasons and better able to do what's best for the company. "The question we always ask is, 'How would you feel if this person were to go work for your competitor?'" says Pau.

It's a question to which Sandy Weill should have given more thought. Under Jamie Dimon's watch, JPMorgan Chase saw enormous growth. Weill, meanwhile, left Citigroup only four years after he pushed Dimon out. In the subsequent years, the company was crippled by the financial crisis, a situation that Weill attributed to poor leadership. Weill's reputation, and his Citi stock, took a beating. "What you don't want to do is throw the baby out with the bathwater," Shedletsky warns. After all, you never know how that baby is going to grow.