

"Taking my former boss to task ..." (A)

Dear Max:

You probably won't remember me, but I was a young staff member of yours some twenty years ago. You were very good at remembering people's names and background ... We were always impressed, in our first day, when you addressed us all by our first names. For me, and for several others, too, I think working with you was special, you were our coach and mentor. It influenced my career: I believed in you and trusted your advice. Now, twenty years on, I need to tell you about my experience, in case it's of any interest to you.

Immediately after graduating, with top honors, I was offered a job with a strategy consultancy. I worked hard, you know how it is ... nights and weekends. I also got married. Luckily, my wife was very patient and understanding. She put up with having me come home late every evening, never going out, hardly ever going on vacation... All for the sake of my profession.

Two years after joining the company I invented or played a decisive role in inventing a powerful new model of strategic analysis for assessing product profitability, or the profitability of sales areas, manufacturing plants, and so on. Two years later, the new model had become a major source of revenue for the company, greatly enhancing my standing.

That summer, my wife, the two children and I took our first vacation. Until then it had been unthinkable, partly for financial reasons (we had two children in four years) and also because I was completely taken up with my work. On our return, the company offered me promotion: I was to join the head office in my country's capital. That meant leaving our beautiful house by the sea in an area with every possible amenity and a quality of life second to none in Europe. My salary would be doubled. As I explained to my wife, this was the reward for our devotion to the company. She accepted, and we recalled your advice about commitment and loyalty to the company.

We moved to the capital and into a house in the suburbs. It was nice place to live, but the traffic getting into and out of the city center at rush hour was a major drawback. I was working late and weekends again... After ten years of marriage, my wife decided she wanted a divorce, and she had every reason. So I threw myself even deeper into my work, which by now was my whole life. The following year I was made a partner of the firm. At age 36, I was earning twice as much as any of my MBA classmates, and I was the youngest partner in the venerable firm's 80-year history.

Shortly after our divorce, the company launched an attempt to conquer the Asian market, and I gave it everything I had. Over the last five years I have continued to live in the capital, but not in the suburbs any more. Now, I live in one of those apartment hotels where every imaginable service is laid on (even your clothes): gym, swimming pool, etc. And it's literally two hundred yards from the office. Not long ago an important European business magazine published a report on strategy consulting, featuring my company. I was given star treatment; there was even a photo. I still felt I was privileged to have such a fascinating job and was pleased to be an important member of the company.

Then, just over a month ago, the managing director, Bruno Barratier, who'd been my mentor, resigned for health reasons. Bruno was in his late fifties and we'd often spoken about what would happen when he retired. I'd always understood I would inherit his position. A few days ago, however, the Board of Directors accepted his resignation and appointed Christopher McMahan to be the new managing director. Before that, he was Vice President of a large

global assembling and manufacturing company, with an emphasis on design and cost saving.

I still haven't recovered from the shock... Perhaps I could have pulled some strings to improve my chances, or even make sure I got the job. But I didn't, because even though I knew some of the Directors thought the firm needed fresh blood at the top, I was convinced my dedication, loyalty and contributions would be recognized and rewarded.

According to Bruno, however, the Chairman, Eric Rosenberg, thinks "I'm more valuable to the company in my present role". In contrast, Rosenberg, who's slightly younger than Bruno, "brings experience that, at this point in time, will be very useful in general management". I don't know if he's right. But I do know what this means for my career: it'll be another ten years at least before another opportunity like this comes up...

Clearly, my dedication and loyalty have been a waste of time. I always thought what was good for the company was good for me. Now I realize that's wrong and have been reconsidering my views on life and work.

I've been up all night taking stock. This morning, for the first time in twenty years, I didn't go in to work. And I've been thinking about our joint work and the advice you gave us ... You should be more realistic and not preach what isn't true, even though it ought to be. You should tell your people to forget about being altruistic – they must think of themselves. If they don't, some day they'll suffer the consequences... Their company will take advantage of them, and without even realizing what they are doing, their bosses will use them to advance their own career. You should teach them to protect their own interests as far they can...

You probably think I'm embittered. And you're right. Because I've given the best years of my life to a lost cause, as my ex-wife used to say. I was too committed, and now I realize I've been used.

Tomorrow I have an appointment with a headhunter, who's already approached me three times. I'm going to change company. I'll probably stay in consulting, but I'm not sure. In fact, I'm not sure of anything any more, except that I'm never going to devote myself so unquestioningly again.

I would like to see you again. In any case, I'll let you know how I decide to continue my career.

Best wishes,
Bill Koenig