

CORPORATE CONFIDENTIAL

50 SECRETS YOUR COMPANY DOESN'T WANT
YOU TO KNOW—AND WHAT TO
DO ABOUT THEM

CYNTHIA SHAPIRO, PHR



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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED IN LOVING MEMORY TO

*Robert Eddy Siegmund, an extraordinary man whose tireless dedication
to the improvement of employees' work lives has been a true
inspiration.*

I love you, Dad.

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Introduction

Breaking the Corporate Code of Silence

Do you feel there's something hidden in your corporate culture, looming over your career, but can't quite put your finger on it? It's not your imagination. It's real.

Every day in America employees are being quietly sidelined, marginalized, managed out, forced into retirement, and laid off without ever being told the real reasons why.

We go to work, we do the best we can, we work longer hours, we learn every new skill required of us, and we expect to get rewards—increased salaries, perhaps even a corner office someday. What happened to that? How did our workplaces become so unrewarding, unfriendly, indifferent, demeaning? What happened to being rewarded for loyalty and hard work?

The answers to these questions have been locked away from employee access within the hidden agendas and secret rulebooks of Corporate America. The rules have gone underground, influencing our career paths every day as an invisible undercurrent, and keeping us from easily accessing the rewards that were promised. The safe path is now obscured beneath corporate rhetoric, protectionism, and secrecy.

How do I know? Because keeping that information secret used to be my job!

As a former human resources executive and vice president, I was one of the ones in charge of the standard internal maneuvers HR departments use to protect a company's interests while keeping employees in the dark. Today, as a workplace consultant and employee advisor, I've seen it all—from both sides.

I know the standard secret criteria by which many companies decide to sideline, lay off, downsize, fire, and even manage out an employee. I know what companies really look for, truly care about, truly hate, and talk about behind closed doors. I also know the prevailing hidden agendas used to determine who is favored, promoted, protected, and even given a second chance. Most importantly, I know why corporate America is forced to keep all this critical information hidden from their employees.

Now you will know it too. You will finally learn what secretly motivates, scares, and inspires your employers. This book will provide readers with a vantage point traditionally reserved only for high-level executives and HR professionals.

In this book nothing is sacred, nothing is held back. These are all the taboo topics

no one talks about outside of closed-door executive meetings, until now. From age discrimination to favoritism; retaliation to protectionary maneuvers. Every unseemly and confusing work situation is covered, as well as the step-by-step information on how to deal with and protect yourself from each one.

This book is not meant to condemn any particular company, but to inform. My motivations come from a genuine love for the HR Profession, a first-hand understanding of what corporations are up-against in our highly litigious society, and the highest respect for hard working employees.

This book provides an opportunity for both employees and employers to see things from the other side. Employees will gain insight while developing a greater understanding of why Corporations are forced to operate the way they do. Employers will have the opportunity to remember what it's like to be an employee caught in the system, unsure of their next move with their livelihood at stake.

Corporations have high-level consultants and advisors on their side telling them which moves to make. Its time employees had an expert on their side, providing them with information that will level the playing field.

I wish you the very best in your career path, with the understanding and power to generate the rewards your efforts deserve—the ones that were promised.

Note to the Reader

The stories in this book are based on actual occurrences and first-hand accounts from those on the inside. They've been compiled from a wide variety of employees and organizations across the United States. The names, and in some cases genders, have been changed to protect the identities of the individuals. These accounts were included to present a sampling of general practices currently in operation across Corporate America and do not reflect an experience within any particular company.

This book is not intended to give legal advice. Any reader who believes he or she has a grievance should consult legal counsel.

For ease of reading, this book uses the generic *he* and *she*. There were no gender specific implications for any of the secrets revealed or stories told, and any implied references to gender were unintentional, unless otherwise specified.

These employee stories could be any one of us, these companies could be any company in America—even the one you're working for right now.

Chapter One

Are You Suffering from False Security?

Can you tell if your job is in jeopardy? Would you know the signs? We all like to think we would, but thousands of employees are blindsided by layoffs, reorganizations, and downsizings every day. There are millions on unemployment right now who most likely never thought they would be the one left holding a pink slip.

Your career is in danger right now, simply because you have no way of knowing what to look for, no way of finding the true agendas that determine whether you are seen as an asset or a risk.

Do you know what opinions your company has of you right now? Those opinions are actively determining your job security. Those opinions are built on the secret agendas within your company.

This chapter reveals the secret methods that can be used to remove unwanted workers such as cleaning-house layoffs, underhandedly managing an employee out, and even making an illegal firing appear legal. If a company wants you out, there is always a way they can maneuver around the law. This chapter will tell you what to look for, and how to save your job.

You could be making career-threatening mistakes right now. What you don't realize is that your company will never tell you when you've made one of these mistakes for fear of legal exposure. Since an employee is much less likely to sue if he thinks the job loss was due to impersonal business factors out of his control, companies spin the rhetoric we've all heard: "We've had to reorganize your department," "We just can't afford to keep you on right now," or "We've decided to go in a different direction and are eliminating your position." Those lines are rarely the truth.

The truth is, your company knows exactly why some employees are kept while others are let go, and now it's your turn to learn those same secrets.

First, you need to know what you're *really* up against.

SECRET 1

The law cannot protect your job.

Many employees mistakenly believe the law will provide them with protection from retaliatory or unfounded job loss. In many of today's workplaces, this is nothing but a false sense of security.

With all their expensive attorneys and consultants, most companies have found many pathways and gray areas around an employee's "legal rights."

Companies have learned to protect themselves fiercely from those they feel are out of alignment with what they value. If unfavorable judgments and opinions are allowed to progress, they can take you from someone the company has interest in, to sentencing you to the sidelines, all the way to full persona non grata. **Yes, companies do have blacklists.**

One of a human-resource department's secret objectives is to remove these unwanted employees while legally protecting the company. And most are very good at it. **There are ways a company can remove you so you never know what hit you or what you did that cost you your job!**

Companies don't say "you're fired" anymore; it's too risky. The removal process is now much more subtle. You need to know what those subtleties are so you can tell when your career might be in jeopardy.

Managing an employee out

One of the preferred methods of removal is the one no one talks about: managing an employee out. It can provide the most protection for a company with the least amount of paperwork. The basic concept is simple: make the employee's work life so difficult and unsatisfying he leaves on his own. If the company can get an undesirable employee to quit, they won't have to deal with the complexities, costs, and potential liabilities of firing him. No severance, no unemployment issues, little or no potential for liability. Most employees never see this one coming because in many companies it has become an art.

The signs are always there, if you look for them. Too many employees keep their head in the sand because they don't want to believe their company could lose interest in them. That's a good recipe for being blindsided with job loss.

Here are just a few signs that you might be in the process of being managed out:

- DANGER SIGN 1: You're feeling grossly ignored, overworked, underpaid, or set up to be unsuccessful.
- DANGER SIGN 2: Your boss doesn't seem to like you or pay attention to you the way he does to others.
- DANGER SIGN 3: Your office is moved to an undesirable location or you are regularly given the assignments no one else wants.
- DANGER SIGN 4: You're being given impossible tasks with unrealistic deadlines.
- DANGER SIGN 5: Your boss surprises you with a scathing performance review.
- DANGER SIGN 6: The company brings in someone to "help" you with your work and you find yourself

training her in the nuances of your position and tasks.

- DANGER SIGN 7: Your company moves you from department to department so you never have a chance to complete anything.

I think you get the idea. It's every employee's worst nightmare.

Shawn, an assistant with high aspirations, had his desk moved into a busy hallway even though there were other offices and cubicle spaces available. When he complained he couldn't get any work done, he received a speech about being a team player. Do you really think an employee the company valued and wanted to keep would be relegated to a hallway? No. He was actually in the beginning stages of being managed out because he had expressed negative views about company policies. He was unable to get his work done, rightly felt the company didn't value him, got fed up, and left. Mission accomplished. The company didn't have to fire him, didn't have to deal with unemployment, and got rid of its negativity problem.

Lisa, a member of a fast-paced and high-producing customer service team, had her salary frozen and workload increased to twice that of other department members. After struggling for several months, she finally approached her supervisor to question the heavy workload and seemingly unfair distribution of tasks. Instead of receiving the help she was hoping for, her boss questioned her "fit" with the position and ability to handle the job. He put it in writing. It's no surprise an employee would find this extremely frustrating. After all, that's the point.

What Lisa didn't know was that her company had decided to manage her out because she was a gossip, sharing all of the latest dirt on both the company and its employees. Not surprisingly, her gossip made her boss and the company executives nervous. They saw her loose lips as a liability. After doing twice the work of others only to be rewarded with a poor review, Lisa finally quit. The company didn't have to deal with firing her, and they no longer had a gossip problem.

An employee who finds herself managed out ends up disliking her boss, distrusting the company, and is usually left feeling betrayed and confused. But it's a highly effective and relatively protected way to get rid of employees companies no longer wish to employ. **The cold truth is, many companies would rather incur bad feelings than be faced with the possibility of a lawsuit, a messy firing, or keeping an employee they believe could become a liability.**

Yes, companies really do target people for removal, people they feel are negatively impacting the careful balance of success they've worked hard to create.

Making an illegal firing "legal"

In some companies managing out can even include making an illegal firing appear legal. It involves setting up an employee with documentation that makes him look like

a poor performer so he can be fired “for good cause.” This is especially important when the true reason for the termination has nothing to do with performance.

In most states, even those allowing “at-will” employment, companies will tend to generate defensive documentation.

“At-will” employment is a policy originally designed to protect the employer and employee by allowing either side to terminate the working relationship at any time for any reason. But it won’t keep an employee from filing a discrimination claim after the fact.

What all this legal maneuvering means is, even though companies in “at-will” states are allowed to terminate without a reason, most like to generate paperwork that shows performance-based reasoning behind their decision to terminate—just in case.

The easiest way to do this is by having documentation that shows the employee had low review scores, underwent corrective HR counseling, and was unsuccessful in his work tasks. This will greatly help a company’s case if a claim is filed. However, this can be all too easily achieved by setting up the employee for removal beforehand: holding the employee accountable for things that have been allowed to slide in the past, assigning projects and task that have little or no chance for success or completion, coupled with a poor review. Within a staggeringly short amount of time, no matter how good your work actually is, there is enough “documentation” to make you look as though you haven’t been doing your job. If all this hasn’t caused you to quit, a company can now remove you in relative safety without having to worry about the potential for a lawsuit.

These companies don’t care if you think poorly of them, as long as you go away quietly. Legal restrictions are not going to stop some from protecting their interests.

The myth of “performance improvement”

Many companies have “improvement” programs for employees who have gone astray in their work performance, or are not meeting expectations. It is usually presented as an opportunity for an employee to make improvements before “further disciplinary action is taken,” (a.k.a.: their employment is at risk). These programs can be very confusing for employees—and for good reason. In many cases, they’re not real.

Performance-improvement programs are too often nothing but a smoke screen, a protective mechanism. This type of action is much more about an employee’s behavior than “work performance” or “expectations.” Standard work performance issues usually only require a casual discussion with your boss, not meetings with HR and paperwork for you to sign. So, if you are in one of these programs you can safely assume that you’ve done something wrong they can’t, and won’t, openly talk to you about. They are not looking to help you “improve,” they are moving you out. In many

cases these programs are nothing more than an excuse to gather documentation so the company can legally fire you while providing the appearance that they've "made an effort" to help you improve (something a judge or lawyer will want to see).

If your boss has put you in one of these programs and is documenting weekly meetings, hanging over your shoulder, and constantly on the phone with HR, it's over. You have lost the support of your company and it's not coming back. Neither is your job. Very rarely do employees survive this particular gauntlet, and in my personal opinion, you shouldn't bother trying. Use it as an opportunity to find another job. It's easier to find a job when you have one. (Psychologically, companies tend to be more interested in employees other companies also want. Looking for a job while you have one makes you appear more desirable, and they usually don't check references on your current employer.) So, while HR scrambles behind the scenes to put together enough documentation to deter a potential wrongful-termination suit, use this time to find a new company that will appreciate what you have to offer.

Don't worry about being "wrong"

Many employees worry about being wrong and jumping to another company prematurely. If you're afraid you read the signs incorrectly, you won't hurt your career by finding another job. You could actually preserve it.

Telling your company about another job offer will let you know exactly where you stand. If your company truly values you, they will realize they need to start showing it. They will either state how much you mean to the company, or they will make you a counteroffer to keep you with them. Always give your current company the chance to make a counteroffer, if you wish to stay.

However, if you were right to look for a new job then you've just saved your career by jumping in time to keep yourself off unemployment and keep a damaging termination off your résumé. You'll know whether you were right or wrong the minute you tell your company about the other opportunity. If they seem happy for you, encourage you to take it, or don't make you a counteroffer, you did the right thing!

SECRET 2

Layoffs aren't what you've been told.

They go by many names these days: layoffs, reorganizations (reorgs), reductions in force (RIFs), downsizing, reengineering, even resizing. No matter what your company wants to call it, no matter how different they tell you each of these are, they're all the same. And they're not what you think they are.

Most employees believe a layoff has nothing to do with performance or behavior,

that it's caused by unfortunate external circumstances out of your control and that the company would have kept you on if it could have. This is exactly what companies want you to believe. But unless your company experienced catastrophic financial failure, this is rarely the case.

This misunderstanding of what layoffs truly are has led to a critical lack of awareness in the important changes employees must make if they are to be protected in the future.

No matter what reason your company gave you for a layoff, the real reason is most likely that they lost interest in you. Somewhere along the line, they got the idea that you were no longer worth investing in and opinions soured.

Whether formalized or unwritten, there is *always* a “layoff list” of employees the company wouldn't mind getting rid of without the potential for legal complication—which is precisely what layoffs provide. That's why human-resource departments secretly refer to layoffs as “cleaning house.” Conversely, and more importantly, every company has a hidden indispensable list of protected employees who are virtually guaranteed job security no matter what. These are the favorites.

So how can you tell if you are in danger of being laid off, RIFed, downsized, or reorganized? First of all, if you were on the indispensable list, you would know it. Companies have become very good at letting their most valuable assets know they are safe even in the face of financial difficulties. If your boss hasn't pulled you aside “confidentially,” to put your mind at ease, you are not safe.

The danger signs for layoffs are usually a combination of the following factors:

- DANGER SIGN 1: You are highly compensated compared to others.
- DANGER SIGN 2: You have a less-than-stellar relationship with your boss (who do you think decides who goes and who stays?).
- DANGER SIGN 3: You have been openly negative about company policies or positions.
- DANGER SIGN 4: The company numbers that support your position have recently dropped or disappeared.
- DANGER SIGN 5: Your project was canceled or your primary client has decided to go “elsewhere.”
- DANGER SIGN 6: You've had a medical or disability leave within the last year, have filed a workers' compensation claim, or lodged any kind of complaint against your boss or the company.

Several of these things might sound like retaliation—and they are. *The harsh truth is, layoffs provide a safe forum for cleaning house without fear of legal exposure, and for many companies that's too tempting to pass up.* Many times, layoff lists include employees who have caused grief, been outspoken or negative, or cost the company too much money within the last year.

These decisions are rarely solely financially motivated, as your company would have you believe. Even if your entire department was eliminated, if you were

considered “indispensable” and critical to the success of the company, you would have been moved to another area.

SECRET 3

Why *no one* will tell you when your job is in jeopardy.

You could be making career-threatening mistakes right now and not even know it. **Most employees carry multiple career-threatening mistake patterns throughout their careers without ever being told by their employer or boss.** In fact, human-resources professionals and executives have been instructed for years *not* to tell employees what they’ve done wrong or what’s cost them their jobs.

Rather than being corrected, employees are quietly sidelined, managed out, or placed on the next layoff list without a truthful explanation. Instead of the truth, the corporate mouthpieces are forced to say things like “We just can’t afford to keep you on right now,” “We’ve decided to reorganize your position/department,” “Your project has been canceled/restructured,” plus countless other excuses or smoke screens.

What they should be telling you is, “You embarrassed your boss and he had to cut someone from his team this month to make his budgetary goal.” Or “You’ve been saying negative things about the company and we would rather have someone who openly supports our efforts.” Now, *that* would be helpful!

Instead, consequences of employees’ career mistakes have gone completely underground to become virtually invisible. And without visible consequences, an understanding of true expectations is deteriorating at an alarming rate. Too many employees are passed from company to company making the same mistakes again and again.

So why don’t companies just come out and tell employees what they’ve done wrong? They can’t. The cost threat is too high. **In today’s litigious society, companies are more afraid of being sued than of lying to or replacing an employee.**

In the good old days, an employer could sit you down and tell you exactly what you were doing wrong, even if it was something we would consider politically incorrect today. The expectations for employees were very clear, even if they didn’t always agree with them, and employees were able to manage their careers accordingly. The rules were found in the company handbook and your boss made sure you knew the behaviors that ensured success.

Today, if a manager tells an employee he’ll be let go if he isn’t “more positive and upbeat at work,” the company runs the risk of having that employee cry foul. That employee might assume the company is trying to change “who he is,” and as the

pessimistic person he feels he has a constitutional right to be, his next call could be to a lawyer. If you're an executive or HR person, that threat of liability to the company could cost you your job. So what do you think HR will be more willing to risk: helping an employee understand what he did wrong so he doesn't do it again, or protecting their own job security? Now you understand what you're up against.

Unfortunately, the very laws designed to protect employees are now exactly what's keeping their companies and human-resource departments from helping them. We're living in a corporate environment of paradox where companies are unable to correct mistakes and bad habits, but find they cannot risk continuing to employ someone who exhibits them.

Your best protection against all this? Knowing what the secret criteria are, and staying on the right side of them. Without knowledge of your company's true agendas, you won't know you're in trouble until it's too late. So, how do you find out what they are? Read on ...

SECRET 4

It's dangerous to do what your company says.

All companies have layers of unspoken hidden agendas. They're lurking just beneath the surface of a glossy corporate spin. If you allow yourself to navigate via corporate spin instead of learning what's actually going on behind the scenes, you could find yourself getting caught in the void between what the company says and what it actually values, or between its true agendas and its public statements.

A Fortune 500 company has been promoting their commitment to an employee "work/life balance program." They've extolled its virtues throughout their hiring process, offered classes on creating a healthy balance between work and home life, and managers have openly identified it as one of the company's core values. The company has paid a great deal of lip service to it, and thinking the company truly supported it, many employees were excited and eager to incorporate it into their lives. Many of those employees made a fatal mistake. If they were paying closer attention they would have seen what is *really* important to the company: staying on top, staying ahead of the curve, keeping its industry edge, and putting the needs of the company first—at all costs. (Obviously, no company would post these as their core values; you have to look a little deeper to find them.)

The truth is, the company began this campaign to improve its public image. This message did not override the company's primary values which still required a commitment to long hours. Therefore it was not something for the employees to have followed—if they wanted to keep their jobs.

Consequently, the employees who were being rewarded were not those with good work/life balance, those who only worked fifty hour weeks and went home to be with their families. The company's value system appeared to reward those who put the company first, stayed at work and got it done no matter what the hours or personal commitments. Many who bought into the work/life program were surprised with poor reviews, no bonuses, and lost stock options. Many also felt they had been secretly labeled by top executives as "non-team players" who, when given the choice, did not put the company first. Since the "program" was implemented, many employees who believed the company's rhetoric have left, and new employees continued to get caught in the corporate spin.

A much smaller company of around fifty employees decided to craft a list of their core values for all to follow. One of those values was "integrity." They asked the employees to use integrity in all they did and in every transaction while representing the company. It was prominently displayed in the new performance review and proudly posted on the walls. But if the employees had been paying closer attention, they would have noticed the company's livelihood hinged on winning contracts and that nothing would ever stand in the way of that objective. They would have noticed that integrity was regularly cast to the wind if a contract was on the line.

When the company's very first contract was lost in the interest of maintaining the commitment to "integrity," several employees' jobs went with it. Those well-meaning employees had stood their ground thinking the company was behind them only to find they had been hung out to dry, caught between what the company said and what it truly valued.

In today's barrage of confusing corporate messages, it is imperative that you develop the ability to see things through your employer's eyes so you can navigate based on their true agendas rather than the public facade. They are two separate things. It is the failure to see or determine the difference that causes many employees to be blindsided with job loss and broken promises.

Your company's *real* motivations

Each company will have their own unique value system and agendas for you to uncover, but here are the top agendas all companies share. Beware that you always stay on the correct side of these *true* agendas:

MOTIVATION 1: Protection

If a company feels you are opening them up to any severe liability or inconvenience (even if it is justified), many will remove you as quickly as possible. When you put your own needs ahead of a company's protection, you are red flagging yourself as

someone who is not a team player and cannot be trusted. In today's litigious society, many companies value protection above all else. Threatening a company's sense of protection is the number-one cause of job loss today. (More about this in the next chapter.)

MOTIVATION 2: Money

Their money, not yours. If they feel you value your money more than theirs, you will be gone. The best defense is to always treat your company's money as if it were your own.

MOTIVATION 3: Open support

If your company feels, for whatever reason, that you do not openly support their policies, positions, or direction you will be out. Naysayers beware!

MOTIVATION 4: Maintaining an "edge" in the marketplace

Companies are highly fearful of those who appear to be stagnating, have fallen behind, or have become distracted by something in their personal lives. They feel their only chance at keeping their edge is to constantly stay ahead of the curve. This motivation/fear is one of the main reasons companies continue to replace older workers with younger ones.

MOTIVATION 5: The image of success

Companies are compelled to surround themselves with people who act and appear successful. If you are expressing negativity, pessimism, or a downtrodden persona, you will be replaced by someone the company feels can help generate a more positive atmosphere. Companies fear pessimism and negativity more than any other behavior in an employee because it erodes the environment of success they are constantly working to create.

Finding *your* company's hidden agendas

Those listed above are the core agendas for most companies, but each company you work for will have its own set of guidelines and unwritten rules. To truly protect yourself and your job, you need both.

To find the hidden agendas in your company, look at what its key decision makers consistently reward and value (even if it's never talked about, even if it's openly denied or politically incorrect).

Don't look at the good intentions and well-meant speeches. They may be what a company truly aspires to, its ideal, but you can't follow an ideal and protect your job