



Vulnerable at Work

Business Tips from
a Former CIA Officer

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Vulnerable.

It's a word not often used in business. It's soft. It's weak. It's emotional. And there's no room for emotions in business.

Right?

But I'm not calling on my experience in the corporate world as I write this. Instead, I'm drawing from the expertise I gained from almost a decade as an undercover CIA officer. And I can assure you that the Central Intelligence Agency fully embraces the concept of vulnerability as a critical tool.

In the world of espionage, emotions are not simply acknowledged. They're embraced. They're studied, predicted, manipulated, and incorporated. Spying is a very personal business, after all—lives are quite literally on the line.

It's an emotionally charged endeavor to convince someone to betray his country. So it would be foolish, would it not, to treat espionage as a mere transaction? To treat a clandestine asset—someone who is taking great personal risk to provide sensitive information to the United States government—as a line item on a spreadsheet?

CIA officers have little use for spreadsheets.

The typical corporate environment may not be quite as fraught with danger as the realm of spies, but that doesn't negate the value of understanding the impact of emotions on decisions and performance. So, for a moment, let's loosen the ban we tend to enforce on expressing emotions in the workplace. Drop the barricade between the numbers and the feelings. Stop denying those aspects of human behavior that we, as leaders, feel we MUST deny. You can't lead if you're "soft", right?

But you also can't influence what you pretend doesn't exist. Embrace vulnerability, if only to understand why your clients are vulnerable to wooing from your competitor. To see just how vulnerable your boss is to the pressure to give the other guy the promotion, instead of you. To know how vulnerable your best employees are to job offers from other companies.

Understand the emotions behind business decisions in order to influence, manipulate, and control. I assure you, there's nothing "weak" about that.

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Betrayal.

“It’s just business.”

It’s what you tell yourself when you feel betrayed in the workplace. *Your longest-standing client takes her business elsewhere, with no good explanation.*

It’s what you say when you’re feeling guilty because you know the other guy feels betrayed by your actions. *I had to cut headcount somewhere—if not him it would be someone else getting laid off.*

You remind yourself that you’re not supposed to take it personally in business. But your body knows better. *Tension headaches, acid stomach, insomnia, high blood pressure.* Your body takes the negative aspects of business personally, even if your brain tries to deny it.

Face it. You’re vulnerable. So is your boss. So is your client. So are your employees. And their vulnerabilities can result in decisions that leave YOU feeling betrayed. That’s pretty personal.

But this is no advice column. I’m writing about this here, in a business-oriented forum, because I believe the reasons for betrayal that I witnessed in the world of espionage are different from betrayals of the heart—the actions of an unfaithful spouse or a scheming lothario, for example.

The type of betrayal seen in espionage and in the corporate setting isn't less personal, per se, but it is less... biological.

In fact, many of you readers are likely thinking to yourselves that “betrayal” is a bit of a melodramatic term to be tossed around in a business context. And that's fine. Perhaps it is. But don't tell that to the guy who just lost his job. Or didn't make the sale. Or watched his coworker get all of the credit for a joint project. Or saw his small business shrivel up and die because of conditions totally outside of his control.

Because, for at least a short moment, before they can pull the mantra out of their pockets (*It's just business*), those individuals are feeling betrayed—whether by people, by the competition, or by chance.

So, maybe it is just business, but there's no “just” about it. Betrayal—real or perceived, big or small—exists. Livelihoods are affected. Careers ended. Dreams dashed.

But betrayal can also be predicted, and avoided. So let's talk about it.

During my years as a clandestine service officer, it was my job to convince people to betray their countries. I had to convince them that secretly providing stolen information to the U.S. govern-

ment was worth the risks to their jobs, their families, and their lives. To do this, I needed to understand my targets' vulnerabilities, and to tailor my recruitment process and pitch accordingly.

Here are some of the reasons people said yes to me:

- **Idealism.** The ideals I represented appealed to them more than those of the country or group they ultimately chose to betray.
- **Financial problems.** Espionage pays well, and sometimes it's just a matter of price.
- **Boredom.** For some, spying amounts to a grand adventure—these people want to play a starring role in their very own James Bond movie.
- **Ego.** Being courted by a CIA officer is flattering. Imagine being told that you (and you alone!) have the ability to influence major world events. That the information you can provide will determine the outcome of the war/the election/the economic crisis/etc.. That the President of the United States himself will read your reports. Who doesn't want to feel important?
- **Anger.** Angry targets make the easiest recruits. There's little need to persuade someone who already feels betrayed by their country or group. They're looking for revenge, and the chance to commit espionage offers just such an opportunity.

- **Fear.** Fearful targets have seen the writing on the wall. Conditions in their country are bad, and only getting worse. They might not like the idea of being a spy, but they don't see any other way to reverse the downward spiral.
- **Curiosity.** This is the more intellectual version of boredom. People who agree to become spies for curiosity's sake are not fully convinced. They view present circumstances as tolerable, but they're open to the possibility that things could be better. They're tentatively willing to give espionage a chance to see if the outcome is either personally or ideologically worth the risk, but they'll jump ship if the benefits are not immediately apparent, or if they see another way to achieve the same results.

Ultimately, every spy has a different reason—or combination of reasons—for betraying his or her country, and it's a CIA officer's job to identify and cater to the correct vulnerability when it comes time to make the recruitment pitch. Emphasizing the payoff will insult an ideologically-motivated individual. Someone motivated by fear may be scared off by the same pitch that would be highly persuasive to someone motivated by boredom.

A CIA officer's success depends on the ability to fit the operational strategy to the target's vulnerabilities and motivations, before, during, and after recruitment. There is no one-size-fits-all approach in espionage.

Now let's go back to the reasons people agree to commit espionage, and imagine the same vulnerabilities in a more career-specific context. It's not much of a stretch. In fact, just for fun, let's apply those same vulnerabilities to a hypothetical situation in which your boss, "Bob," is considering whether to grant you a much-hoped-for promotion. You deserve it—you've worked hard for it, and your performance far exceeds that of anyone else in the office. Your promotion should be a sure thing. So why might Bob give the job to someone else?

Idealism: Sure, you may have the numbers, but Bob's a nice guy, and he knows that your coworker, "Mike," is going through a rough patch. Mike has young kids, and his wife just lost her job. Mike would do a passable job, and Bob knows the extra money would make a bigger difference for him.

Financial problems: Bob's under pressure to cut costs, and "Mary" has a much lower salary than you do. Even with a ten-percent bump in pay along with the promotion, she's still cheaper than you at your current salary.

Boredom: As far as he's concerned, you're all more or less qualified for the job, so Bob picks the candidate he most likes to golf with/drink with/pick on/etc.

Ego: No one strokes Bob's ego more shamelessly than "Phil," that obsequious toad. It's almost embarrassing to watch. But, guess what? Now Phil is your boss.

Anger: Yes, your performance may be exemplary, but Bob is never going to forget that time your conversation about the presidential debate got a little heated.

Fear: Everybody knows you deserved the promotion more than Sue did. But Bob's under a lot of pressure from his management to improve numbers, and Sue's an easier scapegoat if things don't improve.

Curiosity: Sure, Bob knows you'd be great in the new position. But sometimes he just likes to "shake things up" a little. He decides to hire someone from the outside, just to "see what happens".

Each of these scenarios leaves you, the hardest-working, top-performing employee, feeling betrayed. You deserved the promotion. You expected the promotion. And yet, you probably should have seen this coming. If you knew what to look for, you *would* have seen it coming.

The factors that can lead to acts of betrayal are equally applicable to customers, peers, employees, managers... and spies. And, really, the point of this rather longwinded recitation on betrayal is a simple one: Personal factors impact even the driest of business decisions. Only by identifying and addressing these factors, these vulnerabilities, can you influence and even change the outcome—maybe even preventing those acts of betrayal from ever taking place.

CIA officers are expected to do just this for each and every one of their cases.

Assessment

The “case officer assessment” is an important part of every CIA asset’s file. It is, in essence, a living document—an ongoing report on the “fuzzy” concepts that help CIA management and analysts back home put sensitive data in the correct context. The officer who meets face to face with the asset is responsible for identifying and articulating variables such as changes in demeanor or personal circumstance, the addition of new vulnerabilities, or any hints of hostile control. The details of the report can come from anything ranging from trained behavioral observation and surveillance data, to drunken slips (the asset’s) or simple gut perception (the officer’s).

Time and time again, these “fuzzy” reports have identified problems that no amount of quantifiable data analysis ever could. In fact, the first sign that a case is going bad almost always comes from the soft data—even if this only becomes obvious in hindsight. Assets ultimately revealed to be working as double agents often give hints for months that something has gone wrong: Once punctual individuals arrive late, or miss meetings altogether. Previously security-conscious assets suddenly turn sloppy. Laid-back assets now sweat and fidget through meetings, drinking more, saying less. Or, conversely, previously reluctant spies suddenly become eager—too eager. Once-reticent individuals begin to volunteer the answers to questions that haven’t even yet been asked...

If caught early enough, these behavioral “tells” can be of tremendous value. They warn the case officer that a case may be compromised. They signal to the analyst that the data may not be as accurate as it seems. Sometimes the signs come too late to do anything but cut our losses. Sometimes they come in time to give us a chance to intervene—to prevent the betrayal before it occurs.

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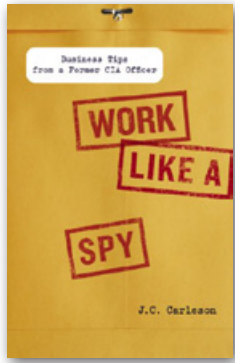
In the corporate setting, assessments need not be so formal to be of value. The point is not to replicate the CIA’s counterintelligence function. Instead, the point is to simply be aware of the predictive effect of vulnerability—your customers’, your manager’s, your employees’, and your own. We’re all human, and we all have emotions. We react, we regret, and we hope—no less so in the office than anywhere else... no matter how hard we try to deny it.

Harnessing emotions requires recognizing them. Observing them over time. Noting changes. Addressing them. Changing them.

So feel free to keep your stoic business facade—it's the corporate version of a poker face, after all. But don't deny the predictive and causative power of emotion in the workplace.

Embrace the concept of vulnerability, and use it to your advantage. 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | In 2001, J.C. Carleson left the corporate world to become an undercover CIA officer. She spent nine years conducting clandestine operations around the globe before trading the real world of espionage for writing about espionage. Visit her website at www.jccarleson.com.

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