Sick of Power Plays? Manage Workplace Power Plays & Revenge Risk

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“Every time we experience power… we find ourselves at… a fork in the road… we can act in ways that lead us to enjoy enduring power… or we can be seduced by the self-indulgent possibilities that power occasions. Which path you take matters enormously.” – Dacher Keltner, *The Power Paradox*

This week I’m reading *The Power Paradox* by Dr. Dacher Keltner, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and the faculty director of the UC Berkeley Greater Good Science Center.

Dr. Keltner isn’t one to mince words: while reading *The Power Paradox* I found a number of tough truths about power especially troubling. According to Dr. Keltner:

- The very practices that enable us to rise in power vanish in our experience of power.
- We gain and maintain power through empathy, but as we experience power we lose our focus on others.
- We gain and maintain power through giving, but when we are feeling powerful, we act in self-gratifying and often greedy ways.
- Powerlessness causes poor health, from obesity to high blood pressure and greater difficulty getting to sleep; “Feeling powerless is a fast track to a shorter life.”
- Cumulative abuses of power lead to diminished trust at work.

The final truth on the list above—the link between abusing power and trust in the workplace—is highly relevant to risk management:

1. Trusting team members are far more likely to bring dangerous situations and troubling threats to light; these staff members believe that speaking up is important and trust that superiors will treat notice of concerns with the seriousness these reports warrant.
2. Trust and purpose *reinforce* each other; high-trust cultures are key to achieving an ambitious mission and seizing opportunities to grow and thrive.
3. Asking for help inspires trust; did you know that asking for help actually stimulates oxytocin production in the people from whom you’re seeking assistance?

Revenge is one of the uglier sides of workplace power struggles. In her article “Here are the top 10 ways people exact revenge on their coworkers,” Jane Burnett cites research from *insuranceQuotes* indicating that staff who want to “get even” serve at *all levels* in organizations; half of the 1,000+ front-line, mid-level and senior staff

surveyed fessed up to committing acts of revenge in the workplace.

Common vengeful acts include:

1. Quitting a job in an unconventional way
2. Hiding a co-worker's possessions
3. Tampering with a co-worker's computer or work equipment
4. Purposefully reducing the quality or quantity of your work
5. Eating a co-worker's lunch

The two most common reasons for vengeance at work are "because someone tried to make me look bad," followed by "someone was rude or disrespected me."

How to Manage Power Plays & Revenge Risk

Try these tips to right workplace power imbalances and reduce rationalizations for revenge:

- **Promote Trust and Joy:** Learn more about how feelings of trust can encourage oxytocin production and bring joy to your team. Inspire your team members to experience trust and joy by: setting and celebrating attainable, defined goals; communicating frequently and transparently; and, giving and asking for help often.
- **Practice Humility & Respect, Not Dark Leadership:** Dr. Keltner advises leaders to respect, dignify, and ultimately elevate the standing of their team members and peers. People with less power are well-practiced in the art of being respectful to those in power, but Dr. Keltner points out that powerful people have less need to practice respect, and sometimes they forget or forsake these practices. Learn to defuse dark, destructive leadership and instead elevate your whole team through humility and mutual respect.
- **Power Up Your Team:** "The most direct path to enduring power is through generosity," Dr. Keltner advises. If you sense that specific members of your team feel lesser, or feel a sense of inability to affect your team and mission, then give those individuals more space, time, resources, and authority. Giving should effectively power-up your team members so they can surpass power boundaries—including breaking down their own feelings of powerlessness.
- **Police & Penalize Power Players—Especially Yourself:** If you observe—or take part in—power plays and acts of revenge, invite the affected powerful and less powerful parties to examine what has occurred. Although fear, jealousy, and territorialism are natural human tendencies that are bound to arise in the workplace, they need not stimulate acts of power and vengeance. Smart teams will openly deconstruct their underlying feelings and motivations in order to expend energy more productively, to the benefit of the whole team and the organization itself. Turn *power plays* into *service stories* by encouraging your team to transform challenging, negative feelings into acts of collaboration and service—acts of giving. Penalize those who continue to undermine the team in favor of uplifting themselves. Hold yourself accountable as well, or ask a peer to help police your actions if you struggle to relinquish acts of revenge and power plays.

Resources:

- "Can't Buy Me Joy (at Work) – Build Trust for Engagement," *RISK eNews*, Nonprofit Risk Management Center
- "The Dark Side of Leadership," *Risk Management Essentials*, Nonprofit Risk Management Center
- "Here are the Top 10 ways people exact revenge on their coworkers," by Jane Burnett, theladders.com
- *The Power Paradox: How We Gain & Lose Influence*, Dacher Keltner

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