

Conspiracy Theories and Ascribing Intentions

Wasting time with assumptions stunts company growth.

8:00 a.m. – There is some information Steve needs for a meeting the following morning, so he places a call to Jeff, the plant manager two states away. Voicemail. Steve thinks, “Why isn’t he taking the call? What could be more important than me? Maybe he’s in the bathroom.” Steve leaves a message.

8:30 a.m. – No call back yet. What’s taking so long? Maybe Jeff’s on the shop floor and his phone is in the office.

9:00 a.m. – No word. This is odd. Jeff is usually so prompt in returning calls. Steve wonders what’s up.

9:30 a.m. – Steve’s been waiting 90 minutes. This is starting to get a bit annoying. If Jeff had any respect at all, he would have returned the call by now.

10:00 a.m. – Nothing. This is a personal affront to Steve’s authority. Clearly Jeff doesn’t respect him as a leader. Come to think of it, Jeff’s been acting a little too independent lately. Steve thinks, “He’s not calling me back because he thinks he doesn’t need me. He thinks he can do it all on his own.”

10:30 a.m. – Steve places another call to Jeff. No answer. Angry. Jeff knows Steve called him several hours ago. Steve left Jeff a voicemail and just tried his phone again and Jeff is ignoring him. Probably saw Steve’s name pop up and hit the red circle. What nerve. Steve will show him.

11:00 a.m. – Still Nothing. Not even a text saying “I’ll call you later.” Jeff thinks he can run that plant without Steve, does he? What a jerk. He’s probably undermining Steve’s authority right at this moment. Telling his team that he’s smarter than Steve is. Steve has had enough. He sends an email. Subject: I left you a

message. Call me back.

11:30 a.m. – Seething. Jeff is probably going over Steve’s head right now. Calling Steve’s boss and complaining about his leadership style. Jeff wants Steve’s job. Come to think of it, the boss is out of the office today. What if he made a discreet trip to see Jeff? Jeff probably called him and asked for the meeting. Sweating.

12:00 p.m. – Steve is done with Jeff. Done! He plans to travel to Jeff’s plant next week and fire him. He doesn’t need Steve. Jeff’s going to get what he has coming.

12:30 p.m. – Phone ringing. It’s Jeff. Steve is so mad he doesn’t even want to talk to Jeff. But he takes the call. The tone in Jeff’s voice is a combination of cheery and

apologetic. “So sorry I took so long to call you, but the audit went great.”

“Audit?”

“Yeah, remember?”

We talked about it on Friday. Our plant’s largest customer was on site for their quality audit this morning. It went fantastic. No findings. I really have to thank you for everything you taught me last year. There’s no way I could have done it without you. But that’s why I couldn’t answer the phone. I was knee deep in questions from the auditor. I knew you would understand. So what’s up?”

12:31p.m. – Relief. “Jeff respects me. He values my abilities. He doesn’t want my job. He wasn’t talking to my boss. I don’t have to fire him. I hope to have him on my team forever. I love this guy!”

Isn’t it interesting how much energy we waste and the erroneous conclusions we draw when we ascribe inaccurate intentions to other members of the team? Examples abound...

An account executive once told me that all of our operations people were stupid and that they intentionally shipped nonconforming product to our customers just so the operations team could work overtime to rework the order.

A receptionist accused me of taking the vice president and the office manager (who usually covered for the receptionist’s breaks) out for a lengthy lunch so that we could punish her by preventing her from taking a bathroom break.

A sales person was convinced that the operations manager wanted to purposely deliver the customer’s order late just to make the sales person angry.

An operations leader said that he was certain that the sales people intentionally held back purchase orders until the last minute just to make the operations team jump through hoops to get the orders out.

An engineering manager once accused me of stealing his ideas and telling the Board of Directors they were mine. As if my Board would ever have believed that I could design a radio frequency transmitter for a healthcare facility.

Finally an installation technician who, on a day I forgot my keys, walked into the accounting office as I was unlocking a file cabinet with an X-Acto knife. He approached a member of the Board and accused me of trying to steal company secrets.



MATTHEW KIRCHNER
Managing Director, Profit360
mkirchner@profit-360.com

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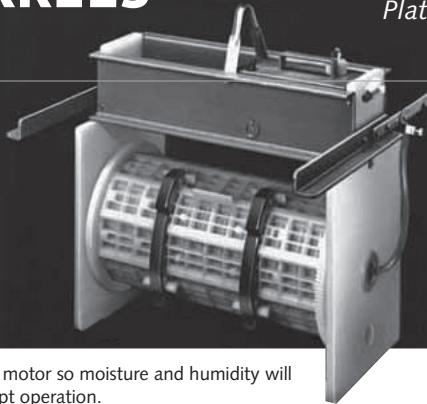
Forget that I was the chief operating officer of the company and there wasn't a single "company secret" to which I already didn't have access or the right to know.

All of these conspiracy theories seem crazy, but imagine the energy that went into coming up with them, the time lost obsessing over them and the huge distraction they created—all energy and time that could have been used moving the business forward.

World class leaders and team members have the discipline to avoid ascribing conniving intentions to others, leaving their focus and energy available for that which adds the most value to the business. **PF 80**

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