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AN INTRODUCTION TO REVENGE IN THE WORKPLACE

I give decaf to people who are rude to me.

—Coffee barista, Portland, Oregon

Beware how you treat your server if you value your morning coffee—or how your mechanic repairs your car, or a technician fixes your computer. As the confession from the disgruntled worker reveals in the quote that opens this chapter, such revenge is more common than you might care to believe. It often is the little nasty things, sometimes harmless, sometimes not, that employees do to a customer when they feel offended or mistreated. And often the customers never know what happened to them (adding to the joy of the avenging employee).

Acts of workplace revenge are not limited to customer-service encounters, of course. Indeed, they are commonplace, part of the social fabric of the workplace. What's more, such revenge is often triggered by seemingly mundane events—the small insults, the public put-downs, confrontations, and reprimands that most people experience on the job at some point. But larger issues come into play as well. Consider the following:

- A boss takes credit for the ideas of a subordinate, who responds by bad-mouthing the boss to others in the company.
- A successful middle manager at a consumer products company is fired summarily and without being

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given a clear reason. Shocked by the action and the treatment, the manager sues the company for wrongful termination and discrimination.

- In an effort to help the boss, an employee mentions that morale among workers is low. Like many who receive such bad news, rather than reacting with gratitude, the boss severely chastises the employee. After that, the employee decides not to warn the boss about another impending complaint—and then relishes senior management’s public chastisement of the boss when they hear the complaint.
- Upon vacating the White House in January 2001, Clinton administration staffers, upset that that Republicans had beat the Democrats in the elections, removed or damaged the “W” keys on computer keyboards throughout the White House—so when George W. Bush took office, the new staffers could not type his nickname, “W.”¹
- An administrator for a fast-food franchise company publicly berates a market manager for failing to meet efficiency, sales, and profit targets. The manager, humiliated and embarrassed, vows to work harder and longer hours to “get even” by proving the boss wrong.

These five true examples came from workplaces in different kinds of settings, and they each yielded different kinds of outcomes. Yet they share two key traits. All resulted from the same motivating desire: to get even. And none of these acts of workplace revenge were violent—however destructive they still may have been.

Does this surprise you? It surprises many of our students and our audiences at conferences and corporate training presentations. In fact, these points are where our view of workplace revenge, based on fifteen years of investigation, differs from much of the current research. And they usually raise some immediate questions.

First, if we contend that revenge is the common motivating desire in all these examples, how would our last story of the fast-food company manager qualify? Surely when there's such a positive outcome—an employee working harder!—we can't call that “workplace revenge,” right? More to the point, why should an organization worry about revenge that benefits it, or at least appears to do so? Similarly, the Clinton White House example could be considered simply a case of lighthearted pranksterism. Or could it?

Revenge as we define it is *an action in response to some perceived harm or wrongdoing by another party, which is intended to inflict damage, injury, discomfort, or punishment on the party judged responsible.*² We suggest that all five opening examples meet this definition. They also all harbor at their core a strong *emotional* response—which, when it comes to workplace situations, spells trouble. Why? For one thing, when emotions are a primary driving factor, positive intentions can easily escalate into bad behavior. For another, even what starts as a harmless prank can be risky; things can all too easily go awry, and the result might not be harmless regardless of the intent. (Just ask the computer techs who spent countless hours and massive amounts of resources fixing or replacing keyboards in the White House!)

In any case, whether you perceive the outcome of a particular instance of revenge as positive, negative, or harmless, we believe it is wise to pay attention to all forms of revenge in the workplace. Why? Because at best revenge signals that something's a bit off-kilter in the organization—and at worst, that things have gone deeply wrong, systemwide. Later in this chapter and throughout the book, we explore in more detail how revenge affects the organization and what managers and leaders can do about that.

But what of our second point? If we're talking here about workplace revenge, why aren't we examining primarily *violent* kinds of revenge? After all, most people think of revenge as volatile behavior, an irrational response in a civilized organization or society.³ But contrary to what many people may believe,

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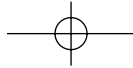
violent forms of workplace revenge are extremely rare.⁴ The sensational headlines and TV news stories we've all seen, disturbing as they are, are not the norm.* What we want to explore in this book are the everyday, all-too-common, and insidious forms of workplace revenge that can cause untold damage—and are worth managers' and organizations' close attention.

Let us be clear, then: this is not a book about workplace violence. Workplace revenge does not equal violence, except in very unusual and extreme cases. Most workplace revenge is not violent,⁵ and most workplace violence is not motivated by revenge. If it were, we would expect most workplace homicides to be committed by employees and coworkers. But they're not. A 2000 Bureau of Labor Statistics report of workplace homicides from 1995 to 1999, for instance, showed that 44 percent of workplace homicides were armed robbery, where the assailant and victim did not even know each other; only 8 percent of homicides were committed by coworkers or former coworkers.⁶ In 1993, of the 1,063 workplace homicides, only 59 involved coworkers.⁷ So, when thinking of workplace violence, don't imagine a disgruntled postal worker (see box); imagine an armed robbery of a cash-laden taxi driver (which, according to the same report, is the most dangerous occupation in the United States, carrying the highest risk of being murdered on the job).

Going Postal

The image of U.S. postal workers gunning down former coworkers and bosses has become the public's favorite example of revenge gone awry in today's society.⁸ That's why it's called "going postal." But does the U.S. Postal Service really have a corner on this particular form of revenge,

*For instance, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2006 (the last year for which data are available at the time of writing), there were only 754 workplace assaults and violent acts in the entire United States. And 2006 was not an atypical year.



or have the media just made it appear so? Consider the statistics. In the past twenty-five years there have been nineteen incidents where a U.S. postal worker or former postal worker shot postal employees. And while that's nineteen incidents too many, statistically speaking it's less than one incident per year in an organization that employs 700,000–800,000 people. Clearly, it's a very rare problem.

By the way, it may surprise you to know that on a per capita basis, the U.S. Postal Service has no more than an *average* rate of “going postal” in the United States. Maybe less. In its own defense, the Postal Service reported that postal workers are only one-third as likely to be murdered at work as the average employee (that is, 0.26 versus 0.77 per 100,000 workers—though this statistic includes other motives for murder besides revenge).⁹ It seems that the U.S. Postal Service has received disproportionate, and one should argue, unfair, media attention—and maybe we can now think twice before using the term “going postal.”

So, contrary to what many people believe, what we have found in our research is that most cases of workplace revenge are nonviolent (for example, the silent treatment, badmouthing). Why, then, should managers pay attention to this phenomenon, and why should organizations care? Because revenge nevertheless can be harmful, sometimes extremely so, resulting in destroyed careers and worse. This returns us to our point about how revenge can serve as a critical signal to the organization. Revenge does not happen in a vacuum. Revenge happens when formal systems break down, when an organization's mechanisms for preventing or correcting injustice don't work. Or when stupid mistakes go undetected in the system—until someone gets hurt by them. When the formal system proves inadequate, the informal system will step in to handle the problem, for better or worse. In other words, where there's workplace revenge, you can bet the

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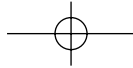
organization is overlooking bad behavior or a dysfunctional process somewhere along the line.

Case in point: an employee decides to enter a part-time, evening MBA program, counting on a company benefits package that promises to reimburse tuition. After enrolling, paying the tuition, and beginning classes, the employee completes the myriad forms and submits the tuition bill for reimbursement, only to find that the company suddenly changed its benefits policy and now won't pay for tuition. Out thousands of dollars, the outraged employee vows to find a new job.

Revenge, then, can serve as a valuable warning bell to companies to sit up and pay attention. In that sense, you can view revenge as a sometimes positive phenomenon. It's a way of restoring justice where justice has broken down, and it can be a potent motivator for constructive change. That revenge can sometimes be positive strikes many people as absurd, in part because they consider only the party who is hurt by revenge. But to fully understand revenge, it is necessary to consider other parties and to account for the positive as well as negative outcomes.

First, who are the parties in the conflict? Whose interests does a revenge act serve and whose interests does it harm? After all, what's good for one party may not be good for another. We know from our research that, in any revenge episode, more than one set of interests is at stake.¹⁰ For example, the episode clearly features an *avenger*, the one seeking revenge in response to the perceived harm caused by an *offender*, who may be another individual or the organization itself; in addition, there are almost always *bystanders*, innocents caught in the wake of the revenge. So at a minimum, at least three different sets of interests can be affected by the act of revenge, and each must be considered when judging the act's consequences.¹¹

Second, what kinds of outcomes result from revenge? Yes, we find that revenge can be destructive and antisocial, but it can also lead to *constructive* and *pro-social* outcomes. For example, the avenger may feel vindicated and empowered putting down



the offender, but the offender is upset (perhaps even bewildered, not even knowing that an offense has occurred), and innocent bystanders may find the tension awkward, or may benefit from seeing a chronic offender put down. Thus, while revenge typically has bad, ugly faces, it also can have a good face (see following box).

The Case of the Eclipse Team

Sometimes revenge can yield positive results indeed. Take the case of the Eclipse team at Data General in the early 1980s, whose story was made famous by Tracy Kidder's Pulitzer-prize-winning book, *Soul of a New Machine* (1981). A group of engineers were passed over to work on Data General's newest, and most exciting and challenging, computer project—a project that upper management deemed necessary to save the company. A senior manager named Tom West took the demoralized, bitter engineers and challenged them on a different project. In fact, he played off their feelings of resentment, encouraging them to be angry with upper management. In other words, West relied on the revenge motive and channeled the engineers' anger into proving the CEO and other engineers wrong about who were the best engineers in the firm. The result? They built a better computer much faster, and their computer ended up being the one Data General produced and marketed.

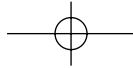
The avenging engineers at Data General did not have the most benign, company-oriented motivation. Rather, their primary motivation for working so hard was to regain their reputation. But two points are important here. First, while the avenging engineers may not have judged their own intentions as noble, they believed they were justified. They believed they were, in every sense of the word, good people. Second, regardless of their intentions, their response benefited the company tremendously. Saved it, in fact.

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But as we pointed out earlier, it is important to remember that even revenge that results in such a happy outcome is *risky*. Things don't always work out as planned. Remember the saying, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions"? Sometimes what an avenger hopes will be a one-shot act that evens the score escalates into a lengthy feud. Escalation is surprisingly hard to stop once it starts.¹² Moreover, often revenge is just plain bad, and we can't always predict which outcome a desire for revenge will turn into. In fact, even the desire for revenge is in itself an unpleasant thing to experience.

Consider too the dramatic examples where revenge—especially the threat of revenge—has proven extremely useful in promoting cooperation,¹³ and where it has served as a powerful constraint against power abuse and injustice in organizations.¹⁴ When people fear revenge, they are more careful not to provoke conflict.¹⁵ For example, during the Cold War, the promise of "Mutually Assured Destruction" or MAD (considered by many to be the best acronym, *ever*) was NATO's and the Warsaw Pact's agreement that if one side launched its nuclear missiles, the other side would retaliate by launching its missiles. Indeed, to make sure the revenge threat remained credible, neither side was allowed to build interceptor missiles for defense. This MAD policy is now widely credited for keeping the two sides from going to war for thirty years (proxy wars not included).

A similar fear in the workplace can keep employees in check: for instance, managers who fear that their most indispensable workers might suddenly quit will be careful not to mistreat them. And as we've already mentioned, the *outcome* of revenge itself sometimes can be positive as well (such as the case of the humiliated manager who "gets even" with the boss by performing

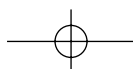


better)—although, again, we think even this kind of revenge deserves an organization’s attention.

All of this is to say that there may be a different way of looking at revenge than how we’ve all been accustomed to viewing it. In fact, what we’re arguing for in this book is a broader, more value-free view of workplace revenge: that there is something to be gained by learning to identify revenge in all its forms. We think that once managers and organizations understand why and how employees seek revenge, they can learn to predict, manage, and ultimately prevent its ill effects.

After all, managers already spend an inordinate amount of time trying to sort out conflict. One study showed that middle managers spend an average of 25 percent of their time on this effort, while the numbers were even higher for first-line supervisors. This same study found that CEOs spend 26 percent of their time dealing with conflict.¹⁶ Yet most don’t usually handle conflict very well. Rather than make peace, too often they ignore or inflame the conflict—fertile ground indeed for the “informal system” of workplace revenge to take over. For example, another study found that subordinates who perceived more conflicts at work also viewed their supervisors as avoiding conflict.¹⁷ Indeed, avoiding conflict may be the most popular approach to conflict, and often the most ineffective in Western cultures.¹⁸

We’ve written this book, therefore, for managers, HR executives, and top leaders who want to learn to promote fair behavior in their organizations and curb the damage that workplace revenge often causes. We are also aware that some readers of this book might find themselves at some point feeling an impulse toward revenge *themselves*, or at the very least needing some basic skills to talk down a disgruntled worker so as to prevent efforts to take revenge. We’ve therefore included a chapter in this book that addresses key things that a revenge-seeker should consider, such as ways to cope with angry feelings and some practical tips for controlling potentially damaging impulses.



An Overview of the Book

Our research into workplace revenge originally grew out of our deep interest in the subject of organizational justice. Specifically, we found that most of the literature on organizational justice had little to say about what employees actually *do* once they perceive that an injustice has occurred. So we set out to see what employees do. One thing many employees do is get even. When we found that many forms of workplace revenge are rather mild and commonplace (rather than violent), we became curious: What motivates an otherwise normal, mild-mannered employee to quietly (or not so quietly) seek revenge? And what forms does this quest for justice take?

As noted, our conclusions are based on fifteen years of our own research on this topic, as well as decades of others' social science research in the psychology of management, organizational justice,¹⁹ social cognition (that is, the study of how people make sense of other people and themselves),²⁰ aggression,²¹ forgiveness,²² and social deviance.²³ Through all this research, we have looked through the keyhole in the corporate door, peering at hundreds of conflicts, and have come up with a few surprising findings (see following box).

Seven Things About Revenge That Might Surprise You

- *Revenge has little to do with the avenger's personality.* At least, not as much as you'd think. The biggest predictor of whether employees act on a revenge impulse is not their personalities but rather the *actions of their manager or coworkers*. In short, managers wishing to prevent revenge should not worry so much about what kind of employees they have; they should worry about how those employees are treated.

- *More employees than you'd think are vigilantes-in-waiting.* Overall, what we find is that most revenge is committed by normal, well-meaning people who are simply trying to right a wrong. In their minds, they are pursuing *justice*. If the authorities in the organization won't handle an offense, and if workers believe they can get away with revenge, then many normal employees will take the law into their own hands and seek to get even.
- *When it comes to justice, employees think just like citizens and juries think.* The justice principles that citizens use to judge the fairness of laws and their enforcement turn out to be the same principles that employees use in the workplace. That is, people care that troublemakers get the outcomes they deserve (for example, prison sentence, disciplinary action), from processes that are consistently and objectively applied, and that they are treated with dignity and respect throughout the process. Violations of these principles in the workplace anger employees, sometimes enough to take the law into their own hands.
- *Avengers (and often observers) view revenge as a moral and rational act.* At the moment avengers seek revenge, they often have reasoned out that revenge is appropriate and morally justified. They believe that revenge is the right thing to do. And not just avengers think this, but often so do observers, who vicariously experience that feeling of righteousness when others are harmed or when a harm-doer is dealt swift vengeance.²⁴ In specific circumstances, then, officemates will tolerate revenge.

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- *Revenge is rarely served cold.* Despite the proverb, “Revenge is a dish best served cold,”* avengers rarely follow this advice. Although revenge is rational, it also is heated. Avengers often act out of anger. We don’t mean chronically angry people who explode at the slightest inconvenience, but normal people who feel shock and outrage. Revenge arises from *righteous anger*, a set of emotions that have a moral foundation, reflecting a sense of violation. These emotions can be intense and long-lasting, and they often fuel the obsession to get even. Perhaps worse, the combination of simmering anger and obsession leads to bad decisions. Instincts do not always make for better decision making, especially when the situation is complex.
- *Avengers often blame inaccurately.* Common wisdom has it that a victim of a perceived wrongdoing should not be allowed to serve as judge, jury, and executioner, in part because victims often blame the wrong person, or blame the right person too harshly. The same applies to avengers in the workplace.
- *Revenge can be creative, but so can the alternatives.* Avenging employees may do something relatively mild, such as construct elaborate revenge fantasies that they have no intention of acting upon, or more extremely, they may bad-mouth the offender, lodge a complaint, sabotage performance, or sue someone. But many angry workers simply do nothing, while others forgive or attempt reconciliation.

*The original source of this proverb is disputed. We honestly don’t know where it came from. Some attribute it to the revenge-obsessed Shakespeare, but not to a specific play. We consulted Shakespeare scholar Michael Delahoyd, who says it’s not from Shakespeare. Some attribute it to Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, from 1782, in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, but others claim it is not in the original French text. It was certainly uttered in the movie, *Star Trek II: Wrath of Khan*, which is why some people refer to it as a Klingon proverb (as in the movie *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*), but this is unlikely to have been where it was first used.

Throughout this book, we will unravel the complexities of these findings in the most interesting and useful way we can. As you read, we ask you to keep an open mind about workplace revenge. To better understand revenge, to understand why the workers we studied acted on it, we had to be willing to see the conflict from their point of view. For managers to prevent workplace revenge, they need to see the conflict from the employees' perspective, and not just fall back on the more familiar managerial perspective. Thus managers must fathom why an employee—and a normal, nice, sane employee at that—would think that revenge might be a great answer to a current problem. Managers who cannot adopt this perspective will have a much harder time seeing it coming. And if you can't see it coming, it's harder to stop it.

To summarize, the focus of our book is on explaining the social and psychological causes of revenge in the workplace. In particular, we argue that *the motivation for revenge is primarily rooted in the sense of injustice*. Further, *revenge should be seen as actions intended to restore a sense of justice*. The following chapters provide greater insight into predicting and preventing revenge in the workplace.

In Chapter Two, we expand on our theory of revenge in the workplace; that is, our core premise that most employees who seek revenge are motivated out of a sense of injustice. They therefore are seeking some form of justice, either from the organization or by their own hands. The theory is simply that offenses are seen as provocations, which lead to blaming, which leads to anger and a desire for revenge, which often lead to acts of revenge. In some cases, people just live with the anger and do nothing in response. And in other cases, the anger and desire for revenge are transformed into forgiveness and reconciliation. Which behavior anger and the desire for revenge lead to depends on the amount of power the victim has, the climate of fairness in the organization, and the victim's personality.

While Chapter Two gives an overview of our theory as a whole, Chapters Three to Six drill down into each part of

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our theory. Thus, to begin, Chapter Three explores in detail the three kinds of workplace offenses that trigger revenge: goal obstruction, breaking the rules and social norms, and damage to reputation—offering many examples of each kind of trigger.

Chapter Four gets inside the mind of the person who is contemplating revenge. Specifically, once provoked, people want to know why the provocation occurred—and who is to blame. Blame is the lynchpin to motivating revenge. In this chapter, we explore psychological and social factors that shape, and often skew, the blame assignment process.

But revenge is shaped not only by the assignment of blame. In Chapter Five, we explore how the desire for revenge is grounded in a righteous anger, an anger that has a moral foundation demanding justice. This righteous anger is a set of emotions that also shape one's thinking about the acts of revenge.

Chapter Six focuses on whether and how people act out their righteous anger. Whether revenge occurs depends on several questions that victims often ask themselves. In particular, victims ask, "If I don't get even, will justice be served some other way?" Next, they ask, "Do I have the power to get away with revenge, without inviting counterretaliation?" Answers to these questions influence the victims' thoughts and emotions about how to act out their righteous anger. Also, we discuss personality differences: some people can be pushed past the breaking point easily; others can't.

In Chapter Seven, we offer practical advice for leaders who must deal with angry employees and would-be avengers. First, it is our position that it is the responsibility of leaders to actively and regularly assess the social and emotional undercurrents that give rise to revenge. Second, leaders must understand the conflict from the victim's point of view. Unless leaders deal with the root cause or provocation, the conflict may not end, but merely be postponed. Third, leaders must act quickly, before the victim's obsession turns to revenge. Fourth, organizations should attempt informal mediation between the victim and offender. Finally, should mediation fail, leaders need to ensure that the offender

is punished if in fact an offense has been committed. Through these steps, leaders are administering justice so that victims do not engage in their own form of vigilante justice.

Another way to stop revenge is for the would-be avengers themselves to consider the consequences and understand the alternatives. Our theory leads to advice for them, as well. Thus, in Chapter Seven we also speak directly to victims of workplace offenses and offer practical advice as how to *avoid* revenge, as often the costs outweigh the benefits. Specifically, we offer ten considerations designed to discourage revenge, which we call “Counting to 10.” In particular, we focus on

- How to more accurately view one’s situation
- How to constructively manage one’s anger
- How to resolve conflict situations before they trigger an act of revenge or escalate into a feud

In the concluding chapter of the book, Chapter Eight, we connect workplace peace to workplace justice. What everyone—from the lowest-level employee to the highest-level manager—wants is peace. Revenge and related conflict can be gut-wrenching, distracting, and usually unproductive. Peace without justice, however, is tyranny—and it does not last. Lasting peace, we argue, requires a sequencing of virtues. Specifically, peace requires reconciliation; reconciliation is easier after forgiveness; and forgiveness occurs more easily after justice has been served. The bottom line? Managers wishing to prevent workplace revenge should worry less about which of their employees may be vengeful and worry more about how fairly they treat their employees. And if they treat their employees fairly, it will lead to a more productive workplace.²⁵

With that overview, let us now turn to Chapter Two and a detailed look at our theory of revenge. This model, grounded in empirical research findings, underpins the practical advice we offer later in Chapter Seven.

