

Keep Your Head in the Game

Cheryl was vice president of sales at a systems development firm when the company hit a slow patch because of development problems with a new software product that had fallen behind schedule.

She remained upbeat and focused on her job and continued to make sales. At the CFO's request, she modified new sales contracts to collect larger cash deposits on signing so they could alleviate their short-term cash flow problem. After several months, customers began complaining to Cheryl about the increased deposits, delayed delivery, and the high number of bugs in their products.

It wasn't long before the CEO called Cheryl into his office and said customers were defecting to competitors. The CEO felt Cheryl hadn't managed customer relationships well and should have brought the problems to his attention. She was stunned when he uttered those dreaded words, "We're going to have to let you go."

What could Cheryl have done differently that might have saved her job? Blame the CFO or the VP of Software Development? No, there's a more effective way.

In an entrepreneurial company, people often handle more than one function, and in smaller firms, everyone typically knows what's happening throughout the company. As companies grow, functions become more distinct, and employees begin to see their functional responsibilities as their only obligation.

Employees who are most successful in their careers usually take a broader view of their jobs. In addition to taking responsibility for their functional area, they're active in understanding how their area is interdependent with other areas and vice versa. In Cheryl's situation, she should have questioned the reasons for the delays in software development more deeply, particularly for a product she had primary responsibility to sell.

When the CFO asked her to modify sales contracts and increase deposits, she should have asked why and initiated a discussion about that decision and the increasing delays in shipping products. She needed to make sure that the CEO was aware of the changes to the deposits that the CFO was requesting and the anticipated production delays. Then they could have developed a strategy for communicating with their customers in a way that all members of the management team could support.

The CFO may or may not have communicated to others the need to increase cash flow in the short term to offset the reduction in cash receipts due to delayed deliveries. The VP of software development may or may not have communicated to others the problems with delayed deliveries

and the bugs, thinking they could overcome them in the short term. Cheryl was the one who took the blame because she was the closest executive to the customers who were complaining to the CEO.

Clearly, everyone should be aware of what's happening in other functional areas around them. But it is YOUR responsibility to find out what's happening in other functional areas if they can affect your job.

If you don't, you run the risk of being blindsided by something you might have been able to detect long before it became a serious problem. On the upside, if you're the one who detects the early warning signs of a possible problem and you initiate discussions for potential solutions, those above you will see you as someone who has the broader interests of the company at heart, and not just your own functional area.

Employees who are known for developing an understanding of other areas of a company's operation and can converse intelligently about current events throughout their company become hot promotion prospects and are the executive recruiters' ideal candidates for more significant career opportunities.

Now go take charge of your career!

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