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Watch for Warning Signals of Possible Layoffs or Individual Firings

The CEO of a Midwestern-based food company left his family in New England, seeing them only on weekends, and not every weekend at that. Your typical workaholic, who came to the office early each weekday, and stayed late. No exercise program, few vacations, little time left even at bedtime, for the late news. Besides, there were papers from the office to go over, until drowsiness prevailed.

His skills and dedication could not save him once the Board decided that, recession or no recession, profits did not match expectations. So out he went, in his early 60s, with some $900,000 a year in severance, to ease the pain.

But workaholics need work, not money. And worst of all, he was totally unprepared for the news. At his age, with his track record, there would be few, if any openings. Could he have known? Would it have mattered? And what does this have to do with people in lower ranks at other companies?

He, like many managers at all levels, was too overly absorbed in matters immediately around him to notice changes elsewhere. He could not see how things happening elsewhere could effect him.

Oh, he would regularly scan the food industry trades, all right. And the *Journal* and *BusinessWeek* carefully for news of his industry. But with a different focus than Board members, who read the same periodicals.Through his eyes, the tables and facts were news.Through theirs, they were comparisons of earnings reports, strategies, tactical moves, and innovations - against his performance.

Had he seen such implications, as they did, he would have faced his critics and possibly altered their views before they hardened into opinion. And had he not been convincing, there would have been more time to seek out a new situation. So much better to do so, anywhere at any level, while holding a position. But once that damned cloud of forced departure came over his head...

Each day's business news sends ripples through corporate boardrooms. Just pluck any day's news from the headlines, like the one on a wintry day not too long ago: "Leading apparel firms vying for ailing Gitano." Just below that: "Japanese brace for trouble...Ten woes speed N.Y. exodus." Deeper into the section: "Lauren layoffs," and "OSHA reforms could force safety revamps."

The day before; the day after. New names, variations of the same old news. Troubles brewing, predators lurking, heads about to roll. Business reporters probing, insiders leaking items, reactions from corporate strategists. Those down the line, unwary, await their fate from the fallout. Too many of them, like our embattled CEO, continue to be fully absorbed with sheets of paper from their in-baskets to notice what may be happening to them.

Would it not be wise to read business news the way that Board members do? And to recall the rule: "It's not paranoia when they're out to get you."

Fortune magazine has labeled business casualties as the "new executive unemployed." For years, they parlayed pay raises, perks and bonuses into comfortable lifestyles and security, with pensions and retirement on the horizon. Then came the "golden handshakes." Now they face despair, kids pulled from college, even loss of a home and financial ruin when their "Cobras" expire and they can't maintain medical insurance. Not long ago, hundreds of thousands of them were running out of unemployment benefits every month. Yesterday's shock over mass downsizings has become so commonplace as to be virtually ignored and numbing - unless, of course, it happens to you.

I've interviewed dozens upon dozens of managers since the wave of corporate Draconia began. Individuals all, to be sure, with diverse backgrounds, skills and what it takes to cope with crisis. If there's one common bond between all but a few of them, it's this: they were blindsided by a reorganization, a downsizing, or an attrition. Or their own failure to understand their own complicity in their personal demise. If, by writing this book, I achieve nothing more than to sharpen survival instincts among the unwary in corporate America - including self-perceived high performers and the so-called professional elite - I'll be largely satisfied.

The "I couldn't see it coming" response was so universal, I began probing deeper. I've asked many unemployed high-level executives questions like these: "You weren't the first to go in your company ... couldn't you react... and effectively defend yourself against disaster?" "Didn't you move to personal red alert?" Sadly, those few who sensed disaster either froze or panicked; did nothing, or the wrong things. Even without recognition, they lacked training and experience. No instinct for "fight or flight." Most often, they ignored fateful warning signals.

The Body Language: A Checklist

Remember when Kremlinologists would analyze who stands next to whom at the May Day parade, to decide which Comrade is on the way up, and at who's expense? While that pecking order died with the Cold War, a familiar version thrives across Corporate America. HR officers, who have a lot to do with it, are careful to keep pending personnel moves under wraps. But they're not perfect. The occasional leak can quickly infect the office body politic. And when that happens, watch out for the ripples. Especially when:

- You're seated further from the power chair in meetings
- Colleagues hush as you enter the room
- Your expense statements are triple eye-balled
- You're teamed with lower ranks on projects
- Your name is dropped from certain "cc:" listings
- Your electronic mail declines
- Maintenance takes too long to change your light bulb
- Your jokes aren't funny anymore
- There's no more friendly banter and ribbing

Here are a few more signals to watch out for:

- The curtailed budget is what I call an institutional signal. Something to carefully note from management, via fax, announcement, policy revision and the like.
- A move to a smaller office
- A reduction in title
- A shared, instead of individual, secretary
- A revised performance or job description

All of the above often occur in the name of "economy." Can the lost parking space and confiscated ID badge be far behind?

Don’t be an “innocent.” Signals can be very, very unobtrusive. Learn to read “between the lines.” There are no benign internal documents.

* * *

You didn’t have to be a trained Kremlinologist with a red hammer and sickle tattooed on your bottom to have learned how to survive “organizational politics” in Duck Hill. To those of you not familiar with keeping your head above water in a small town, it may be difficult for you imagine the corollary between corporate and small-town survival. Duck Hill is the 600-person village of my upbringing, for those of you who are uninitiated in the unsung, largely ignored metropolises of Mississippi. My uncanny insight into corporate survival has stemmed not solely from 25 years of making corporate marriages with high priced executive talent, but was also formed within the confines of a village named for a Choctaw Indian who convinced speculators that rich iron ore was to be found on a hill outside of town. Thus, the many hidden mineshafts for young Duck Hill-ians seeking plums and muscadines on an upward protuberance we called a hill. Many of my ten-year-old colleagues, not aware of “how to read“ being “downshafted,” overlooked abundant danger signals. As in those downsized, these downshaftees spent unpredicted hours of gloom at the bottom of iron ore shafts dug by Chief Duck’s unwary mining company customers.

In order to survive the rigors of political campaigning in Duck Hill, one had to be astute enough to get on the good side of the Chief, who financed all political campaigns in the village. There was the twice-annual campaign for Justice of the Peace. It was held twice annually ‘cause “hunnert dollar George,” who always won, was usually so drunk that he forgot he’d been elected six months previously. Therefore, just to make sure that he was still Justice of the Peace, he’d run again every six months. I should know. My stepfather, Glen Davis Thomason, ran against him. He campaigned on the “out pooring” platform. ‘Cause in Duck Hill, which didn’t have any formal budget at all, the way you got elected was to “out poor” the other fella. Election strategy in Duck Hill was run from a reverse position. Since there was no budget, folks who hoped to be elected had to take any necessary expenditures from their own pocket. Therefore, the campaigner who could convince the populace that he was impoverished and couldn’t afford to be elected usually won the sympathy vote and swept the election -- from the votes of those living and those whose names appeared on headstones conveniently near the ballot box. (George was fond of talking about his electoral triumphs and how he was beholden to those buried behind Binford High School for their continued loyalty. Soon as he could get around to it he was gonna pour a few drops of his best stuff around their gravesites. That is if he wasn’t low on supply.)

My stepfather, a retired Navy corpsman and mortician, came up with a campaign slogan the second time he ran against George. His first one, “You stab ’em, we slab ‘em,” was not as powerful as the one in ‘57 he thought would win hands down: “Family’s Got Only One Aspirin.” This was really poor he figured. He would have me stand on the sidewalk in front of Mike's Cafe - the arch competitor of Blaylock's Cafe (George's last name was Blaylock) with a thread tied around a single Bayer aspirin and proudly proclaim that he was so poor that he only dunked the aspirin tablet down his children's throats once, at Christmas, when they had a cold and brought it up quick before it dissolved. He said, "Now, that's poverty."

As in corporate presentations, never take those you think are on your side for granted. My Mom voted for George, so embarrassed was she for the gossips in Duck Hill to learn of her impoverished standing in the community. (George himself never really came out of the cafe where his head normally rested on his own counter from about 10:30AM to 4:15PM when he had to go tend to his still. George's moonshine had sort of gotten the better of him when he laced it with Red Devil Lye No. 2 to give it a taste of age. "Got a bite to it, don't it?" George had come up with a way to bypass the natural aging process and figured that the majority of his customers wouldn't be able to outrun him with the Jakeleg syndrome created by the lye, which tended to shorten the sciatic nerve in the right leg thus causing one leg to be shorter than the other. That is when it wasn't twitching involuntarily from the effects of nerve dissipation.) The way George survived was to render unto Jessie Whitten, Duck Hill's town marshal, $13 out of every 'hunnert' he fined northerners who sped through Duck Hill's one red light (turned on round the holidays to catch those stupid enough to come within a mile of town). Didn't matter whether you were in a car or not to be fined a hunnert dollars. One good citizen from Illinois was pushing his ‘57 Olds through town out of gas when Jessie got him. Brought him into Blaylock’s Cafe, went over to George’s head, grabbed the mighty thin fringe of hair down near the back of his neck and pulled his head right up. “Fine ‘em a hunnert dollars -- no more, no less.” One began to learn to avoid being in the marshal’s path when he went for George’s head. There was money to be made. Whitten could smell that $13 coming. Anybody in his way would be mowed down. The farmers drinking their Coca-Colas while mumbling about the crops would clear a path for this major moneymaker.

A survivor in corporate America should take these lessons to heart --- read your subject’s demeanor. The cast of his head and the angle of his body will often betray his intentions. I’ve overdone this passage but it’s dedicated to the senior corporate sales director, who’s become my kayaking buddy, who was out of work for close to two years after opening his mouth at wrong time in an oil giant’s corridor. The oilees who severed him had come to think of themselves as genteel folk, not of the old order of roustabout, but a new generation of educated and cultured execs. Guess what? My then soon-to-be-downsized sales chief never read the culture. He didn’t fathom that a ribald pun at the elevator in the executive tower at 1251 Avenue of the Americas would cause his demise. Decorum had become the order of the day --- no exceptions from sales rabble. This from the descendants of Texas wildcatters who thought “decorum” was a breed of longhorn cattle.

Like any storm, the pink slip tornado - that swirl of job loss mayhem - betrays its oncoming force in the form of clouds. Some are tiny, but all are ominous.

Sometimes the signs may appear at first inconsequential. Like when management spruces up the company offices. New furniture, drapes, carpet -- long discussions with interior designers. Special care given to premises and improvements in once previously sloppy quarters. Does the boss have an interior designer crouching in him, yearning to spring forth? Or, *au contraire*, my targeted-for-Pink-Slip employee -- could a sell off of the company be lurking post new decor - once the competition, known for "slash and burn" tactics, makes up with your boss and buys the company. Watch out. Don't become the unwitting Slash-ee.

These are among the most prominent signs to watch for:

1. **Exclusion from prime-cut assignments.** When you've been a first team regular, watch out when you're benched on prime-cut assignments. And don't be fooled by lame excuses, like "We need someone with your experience to stay on the XYZ Project. This new one doesn't match your talent." When you know better, you have two ways to go. First, try to learn about your status. Did you screw up a recent assignment? Are you on someone's "shit list?" If either answer is "yes," you're in deep trouble.

Next, if you're sure there's no valid reason not to move to the prime assignment, talk it over with your boss. Calmly. Without confrontation. There could have been an innocent oversight. One easily corrected.

2. **Missing a promotion.** One of the surest signals that terminal trouble looms is when you're passed over for a promotion, richly earned or scheduled. Perhaps even promised. Again, check for the reasons, advertent or inadvertent. Discuss it, calmly, rationally, at a time when the boss is in a mood to listen. And never bypass that boss, to HR people or anyone else. If that gets back, you might as well type out your own pink slip.

3. **Missing a salary raise.** While promotions are rarely scheduled, salary raises often are timed by company policy. If a scheduled year or 18 months passes without an increase, it's time to learn, directly from your boss, why the oversight. It could be a legitimate, non-threatening reason, like company-wide deferrals to offset business losses.

In companies where raises are unscheduled and based "on merit," those who feel they've gone too long without an increase should (a) bear in mind that management is not obliged to pay them more, and (b) discuss the issue calmly with the boss, offering solid reasons why the raise is deserved.

4. **Missing a scheduled performance appraisal.** This is touchy. Some supervisors either loathe this

procedure, are too busy to get to it - or both. If that's all there is to it, then it's time to back off and be patient.

But beware. These days, in companies where lay-offs are pending, HR officers are prone to freeze performance appraisals for those vulnerable to the axe. It's their way to prevent litigation from someone fired and armed with a favorable report, or from a departing employee whose lawyer is panting to contest a poor evaluation.

5. **When the boss gets scarce, or changes behavior.** Even the toughest supervisors, with few exceptions, hate to lay people off. It's natural for them to avoid everything from meeting dates to eye contact with those they soon will have to terminate.

Since there's no good way to force an appointment, the next best step is the written memorandum - marked "Personal and Confidential." A carefully crafted notice that you sense signs of unease in the relationship, and wonder - point-blank - if there's anything wrong. Seeking something to correct the situation.

At worst, you'll get early confirmation on bad news. Perhaps an expedited "exit interview" at Human Resources. But that's no worse than facing the inevitable. And, at best, your thoughtful memo could trigger a reappraisal, perhaps even reversal of a prior judgment. This is, after all, a human process involving human beings, and people can - sometimes do - change their minds.

6. **A sudden, unexplained, loss of responsibility or authority.** This is common in low-keyed, paternalistic companies, where employees are eased out through carefully choreographed dilution of responsibilities or authority. Never via direct action.

Lots of clues to spot in these environments. Like the reassignment of one's staff people, without explanation. Or the movement of prestigious projects to another desk, even to a junior station. Sometimes, there's a substantial reduction in authority, for example a 50 percent cut in how much you can commit to outside programs, or a precipitous slash of budget.

7. **The dead-end, or suicide promotion, or the "special assignment."** These matters involve less than meets the eye; the particularly insidious ouster. I know of one cosmetics executive who was asked to run a Borghese division in Paris. Sounded like nice duty, until he learned that the operation was losing money and was slated for shutdown.

8. **The imposition of heightened security measures.** Do you wonder why the once benign Wackenhut Security rent-a-cops at your company are gone. Replaced with CIA-looking operatives: steely-eyed; large and imposing with cursory greetings to you where the once friendly Wackenhut "Howdies" were ever present. What about those beefed up security measures; the laser scanning devices in front of executive desks; even the fact that a retired employee after 25 years now had to be now escorted by security agents to visit friends at the company.

Lesson. There may be none. Yet others in the downsizing ranks have ignored the impact of similarly “new” security measures. They may be a preamble to somber changes in mood and depressed psyches and foreshadow earth shattering divestitures, mergers, downsizing, reorganizations and all manner of actions alien to historic corporate cultures.

Lucent’s much publicized swirl downward into the vortex of financial near ruin was part of a larger stage where advanced security also was reported to descend like a ton of bricks upon the company offices in Murray Hill, New Jersey. The *cognoscenti* among the employees who were aware of such changes, called their local headhunters and dusted off their resumes, observing that the federal government’s National Security Agency would have been proud of Lucent’s electronic devices to protect executives from a backlash from among the employee ranks. The employees’ antennas were prescient and foretold 20,000 company deaths to follow.

A lot of words. Perhaps. Or maybe, just maybe, corporate executives want to avoid the remote yet real personal wallop from employees going “postal.” Their own paranoia is reflected through new complex security measures. Perhaps they know the axe is near hundreds of trusting employees. Perhaps they know that the broadaxe as in medieval bloodlettings has two sides -- one to cut and the other to be cut with. Just be very aware.

The cold fact is, it's less difficult to excel in your playing field to keep a good job than to find a new one.

In unpredictable times like these, job preservation begins with the reality check. Keep your eyes open for specific signs and movements - sort of like looking both ways for traffic. With special care when conditions change - while crossing at a London curb, for example, where lorries roll from where you least expect them. A careful probe in all directions is very much in order.

When Management Lies: How to Save Your Job

One of my good friends founded a multi-cultural financial services company. With the Board's approval, he acquired a promising ethnic investment banking company. Before the deal went through, he was assured that he would continue as CEO. That promise lasted only until the deal was completed; the head of the acquired concern had cut his own deal privately with the Chairman.

Handshakes are never good enough. Get all promises in writing. Better yet, get those written documents blessed by an attorney.

Do managers really lie? You bet they do! I recall one situation where a well-known professional service company brought in its third new chief executive in four years. He called in the head of corporate communications and asked: "How can we calm our team and stifle rumors about major staff cuts?"

“We’re about to close the company magazine,” came the reply. “And I could draft a page one ‘open letter’ for your signature, saying how much you respect the contributions of our most valuable managers. Mention them by name.”

The CEO took up the suggestion. The PR guy thought he was clever to list eight friends into published safety. They took him to dinner, to celebrate good fortune. But business did not improve. All eight, plus their perceived savior, were gone in as many months.

Not much in the way of a warning signal here for those who took the CEO at his word. But those who managed to survive were wise to heed the old admonition: “Screw me once, shame on you. Screw me twice, shame on me.” Anyone who believed any promises from that particular CEO were doomed to earn whatever harm was coming to them.

Like the promises of Mike Armstrong to rebuild AT&T after he replaced Bob Allan as CEO. I don’t think any other CEO after Armstrong will, “want to be like Mike.” When this balding Harley hawg rider stomped into Ma Bell from Hughes and said “he would reinvigorate this world class brand” did he mean by that promise that he would mortgage the company’s future by borrowing $108 billion, selling the company’s most lucrative properties, and ending up breaking the $52 billion firm into four separate parts? The payments on the remaining $67 billion debt are a whopping $400 million a month. After breaking the company up and being confronted with his own statements that he said he never would, he and his public relations machine denied all prior statements. Again, believe the words of the new breed of CEO at your peril. How many AT&T-ers will become part of the sausage mill to pay the hundreds of millions of debt on the borrowing. Has anyone asked Mike to reach out and touch someone to help him return to sanity. A superb homemaker would not run the household finances the way “Mike” ran Ma Bell.

There must be something in the water that drives AT&T executives batty. Perhaps it’s the suppressed hierarchy under which they labor. Perhaps inside every senior AT&T executive lies an investment banker who wants to do deals and forget the basics of the business, which is conservative and semi-regulated. For, what else on the planet can explain how AT&T spin-off Rich McGinn - Lucent’s second and now former CEO - forgot that Lucent made its money the old fashioned way -- installing switching equipment at customer telephone companies. Rich wanted to be like Mike. He went a bit further. While Mike enjoyed a healthy dose of competitive tennis, Rich felt he wanted to emulate the playing habits of Tiger Woods in a few short lessons. Yet, first Rich needed a place to practice. Therefore, while he was promising fiscal prudence to shareholder and analyst alike, he forgot to mention that he had borrowed $40 million from the shareholders to spruce up a former fox hunting preserve, once the province of Diamond Jim Brady, to become his own golf club. He figured that it would be embarrassing to shank a drive off the tee in front of low-lifes who could only afford a few tens of thousands of dollars for a club membership. So, he drew a circle of 18 other potential members together and was refurbishing his golf surroundings with the $40 million - just the beginning - when he was caught. But only after he was responsible for a drunken orgy of 32 acquisitions - $27 billion for one - which took him away from any of the realities of the equipment manufacturing and installation business. Mostly, enamored of his company toys, he flew on the corporate jet to mergers and acquisition targets that often just happened to be in prime golf locations. Rich drove a company from a $285 billion in market cap to less than $40 billion. While pursuing this shareholder nightmare, he proceeded to “fib” to Wall Street that Lucent sales bookings would forever continue to result in 20% growth annually. That is until his officer in charge of sales told him that the forecasts were faulty and based on illusion. He fired her. Then, he and the Lucent PR machine figured out how to get out of the limelight of responsibility. They simply blamed her for bad sales and bad forecasts.

They forgot to mention that they were hocking the company to lend hundreds of millions to customers like Winstar so that these telecom customers could buy more and more and more. They also forgot to mention that switching and fiber optics overcapacity had reached 90% and that it was a no-no to book inventory languishing in warehouses as sales. The SEC’s investigation teams appear to be concerned about Mr. McGinn’s tactics as well. After all, SEC employees buy stock too. Didn’t Rich think that stock purchased at $80+ that sank to $6 bucks might make a few folks upset?

The first sighting of a corporate execution very often appears at the company reception desk, in the lobby. Pay heed to who's visiting your organization, especially on the executive floor. Often, it's the consultant, on time to meet with top brass. He's the ultimate outsider. The Samurai with 17 notches on his briefcase from managers felled in the quest for lower head counts. He or she can be charged to study organization, compensation, benefits, manufacturing processes or development. No matter. Heads will roll. Because the next consultant who reports that everything's fine; no change needed; your team's doing a terrific job, will be the first ever to say so.

This retainee, on a quest for "improvements," arrives with Teflon coating. Conversely, his interviewees and their operations bear paper trails of human frailty. He's there as the designated wart remover, and he'll be long gone before any of his own blemishes pop into view.

Few people in corporations understand the lifestyles of those who externally serve their companies - especially not their standards of living. Consultants earn considerably more than those whom they serve. And they're not about to lose a good client without putting up a fiercely political battle to preserve their huge incomes. In fact, once in an organization, they work tirelessly to develop and maintain relationships with those who count - sailing and golfing buddies, colleagues on national committees and charities, sharers of box seats at the opera or football stadium, at the "right" health clubs and at yoga, or whatever alliances and pursuits it takes. While external contacts cannot directly hire or fire, they frequently are people in the know - and wield their knowledge as power.

I recall one divisional manager who postponed a meeting three times with a management consultant from Booz Allen. Sorry, too busy doing a good job. Having a good year, she opined, one of her best in 18 with the company. Who's got time for this nonsense?

Months later, after visits to the company's Paris, London and Tokyo offices, and expense accounts filed for reimbursement from their finest hotels and restaurants, the consultant presented her report. Buried in the voluminous "micro" section: eight paragraphs on operations facing "irreversible losses," from "shifting consumer tastes and new technology." Never mind current profits and rosy short-term projections. Conclusion? The woman and her staff were never to be seen again.

Never consider the outsider as your friend.

Beware of Bean Counters and Other Finance Types

Let's digress a moment and talk about bean counters. They are a bundle of signs and signals unto themselves... self-contained bellwethers who can easily affect your future. Whether it's the stereotypical gray figure who fades into the wall at meetings, with four pens extruding from a plastic protector in his shirt pocket, or the new breed of casually attired young MBA, he or she is someone to reckon with.

No matter how well you perform or how popular you may be, there's a bean counter in the background who values only the numbers - yours, or your department's. Here's a chilling tale from a marketing genius we introduced to a consumer giant in suburban Chicago, whose products are very evident on household shelves across America.

Beware the bean counters. They transform every passion you bring to your desk, everything you value on an emotional level, into columns of neatly devised arithmetic, reducing you to a profit and loss assessment. It's as cold as that.

Our marketing genius launched a successful ski calendar promotion that not only advanced his company awareness and sales, but turned into a profit center. The calendars were being marketed themselves, with lots of corporate logo ID, etc.

Yet he ended up going toe to toe with the CEO to save his job. Turns out that an obscure audit by a ski enthusiast ended up with an innocent question: "Where can I get two of these calendars?" By the time his query moved from three phones to a fourth, it resulted in the corporate comptroller calling the marketing genius to his carpet, to tell him that he had violated policy. No checks were to be banked at the company, addressed to "The Ski Calendar," at his address. In his view, it was better to lose revenue than to violate any corporate policy, no matter how insignificant. A mandatory visit to the CEO followed.

The bean counter is indirectly empowered to save every senior management butt... at the peril of everyone else's. And those precious fannies which sit atop the organization are maintained as the highest priorities. Pay attention to what finance folks say and do internally and externally. Get to know their forecasts and quotes at Wall Street dog and pony shows.

You can be too creative. It's often wise to avoid power clashes with bean counters and bureaucrats over narrowly defined rules. They always win.

The finance pro impacts the investor relations function and perceptions of how well your company is doing. While you toil at your desk, they foster relationships with banks, financial service suppliers and pension and institutional investment managers. Every day, great deals and corporate - as well as individual - survivals revolve around their negotiating skills.

The point, of course, is that finance management, while solving external problems, *typically* keeps truth from their organization and their employees. Maybe for valid strategic reasons - but the bottom line for thousands of unwary prospective casualties is exposure to unemployment.

The following *New Yorker* magazine excerpts regarding job rejection and personnel departments speak for themselves. Although humorous, they reflect what many corporate managers think of the function:

Dear Sir:

A few days ago you phoned us about the job you applied for with our company and we told you that did not get the job. However, we are now writing to inform you that you did not get the job. We wanted to make sure you understood that.

Sincerely,

Personnel Department

Dear Sir:

Congratulations! You got the job! That is probably what you were hoping this letter would say. But it doesn't, because you didn't.

Sincerely,

Personnel Department

Dear Sir:

You recently applied for a position with us, but you did not get it, as we have informed you by phone and by mail. However, we have not heard back from you that you completely understand that you failed to get the job. Please call or write and let us know that you realize that you are not employed by us in any way, and never will be.

Sincerely,

Personnel Department

Dear Sir:

Please be advised that the person we hired instead of you has been promoted to department manager, and he has asked us to inform you that, should a position open up, he would not hire you.

Sincerely,

Personnel Department

Dear Sir:

Would you consider taking a job for less pay than we originally discussed, even though we would never offer you such a job?

Sincerely,

Personnel Department

Dear Sir:

If it is any consolation, we feel that if we had hired you, by now we would have been forced to let you go.

Sincerely,

Personnel Department

Dear Sir:

We are working to find out what kind of carpeting and curtains you want in your new office... Wait, we made a mistake. You're the wrong person. Oh, well, we're going to go ahead and send this letter to you anyway.

Sincerely,

Personnel Department

Dear Sir:

Could you report for work first thing Monday morning, if you had a job? Just curious.

Sincerely,

Personnel Department

Dear Sir:

While updating our file of job applications, yours was folded into a paper airplane and was accidentally sailed out the window. Would you mind filling out the enclosed application and mailing it back to us in the shape of an airplane?

Sincerely,

Personnel Department

Dear Sir:

As you may have read in the newspaper, our company has been crippled by a utilities strike, and we have had to call in outside freelance help, for which we are paying many times the normal salary.

We just thought you should know that.

Sincerely,

Personnel Department

Dear Sir:

It has come to our attention that an employee in our department has been sending you unauthorized and inappropriate letters. We have told him not only that he is fired but that we are hiring you in his place. He left here in an uproar, swearing that he was "going to find (you) and crush (your) head like a walnut." (Some of us think he said "like a peanut," but most think he said "walnut.") If he shows up at your apartment, please explain to him that we were just kidding; we would never hire you.

Sincerely,

Personnel Department

While the youthful manager in a company setting may view the preceding title as a bit too harsh as it applies to the anthropological genus -- *human resources generis* -- those more wizened execs hardened by the reality of the personnel species may look upon the HR folk much more skeptically. For, how are you to really trust a department named human resources when not so long ago these same individuals carried a different name, Personnel. And, if you survey the corporate nomenclature landscape you will find that vice presidents of human resources have obfuscated their identities even further with new terms like Vice President, People Effectiveness or for the succinct, Vice President, People. Well, if this book is about survival and how you as a company employee can read the tea leaves of danger to avoid the pink slip snake before it strikes, be wary of bearing your soul to that avuncular gray-haired fatherly figure who appears to be father confessor. Moreover, be wary even if your HR chief is a young T-shirt clad dot-com wiz kid.

There is no sanctity in the human resources confessional. It is not your private words to the confessor. More likely, it is your weaknesses being stored for future action or, in the case of promotions and plum assignments, inaction. As in every field, there are the bad, the good and the ugly. There aren’t many swans among HR; what few exist have usually played in the operations, line or revenue producing areas before assuming HR as a grooming role prior to greater upward mobility in the corporation. In my experience, the senior human resources professionals to trust are those who have “wielded a pen” or have had profit and loss responsibilities before having had the HR role descend upon them.

Remember. There is no formal downsizing or rightsizing department. And, guess who will be involved when the lists are drawn up for the last act. Human Resources. And what do they remember of you when your name comes up for being fed to the lions: Is it thumbs up from the emperor or thumbs down. And if you think the games in the coliseum in 160 A.D. were any different in generic type than those you face with the chairman of the board, you're wrong. He now wears an Armani suit. But the same mentality that existed in the toga is still alive and well. These are the new emperors' sycophants who must give up their fellow employees to feed the emperor's lust for carnage.

You laugh, do you. Well, these are the same individuals who are reported to state at the height of employee downsizing mayhem that, "We are not firing anyone. We are as a company enhancing our liquidity through revenue enrichment through diminishing the number of employee headcount no longer in our numbers." Or, "this is not downsizing. This is an egressing of employee numbers off the historic roster." You name it, it is a euphemism for employees getting the pink slip, and this group will find a way to dehumanize the works to cover up the actions.

How else can you explain the interview techniques of one human resources VP at a $4 billion forest products company who was asked by the CEO to interview all employees above director level who were potentially slated for promotion. The HR veep took each to his favorite watering hole where the barkeep knew enough to bring him orange juice - minus the vodka - when this personnelist ordered his usual. "Will you have a drink?" he would ask his lunch companion, already nervous. "I'm having my usual." Well, if his lunch companion ordered Chardonnay or Dubonnet or anything light to be social, he or she was dead in the water. The VP was a reformed alcoholic who wanted to stamp out drinking. There is no zealot like a reform-minded smoker or drinker. If this VP mentally marked his lunch companion for extinction because of their drinking propensity, their careers were doomed.

Sound strange. Well, even stranger is the Mormon EVP who runs HR at one of the nation's largest wineries. He also is a double whammy: he heads PR as well. Talk about a strange dude. One headhunter's experience in filling positions with him revolves around this search firm president's ability to advise the candidates that this chief of HR likes to throw challenges in front of the interviewees, even before they get to the interview. He likes to set up shop for interviewing candidates at the Waldorf Astoria and when candidates come to interview with him he gives them misleading directions and locations hoping that they have the sleuthing ability to find him. "If they ain't smart enough to track me down," he reasons, "they shouldn't work here."

Are they all mad? Maybe not. But, survey your fellow workers and ask them what they think of the HR department. I'm sure their views may not be as blatantly negative as the ones held by one group of female executive search consultants who, during a visit with the HR VP of a Stamford, Connecticut conglomerate, were told how lovingly careful the HR VP was to nurture his executive colleagues. "I like to watch them hold the gun to their heads. They often screw up so bad that the boss has me watch them cock the trigger. I usually help them pull it. Then I dig the grave and throw their bodies in it."

That's exactly what he said. He followed up with a soliloquy on work and family in which he described his desire to add to this family if a certain part of his anatomy worked. "I have six kids. I may have a seventh if my little shooter works" he postulated to his female audience, one of whom was so enamored of his ruminations that she immediately resigned from the search business and has never been found since.

The major point of this long-winded seeming diatribe against Human Resources is to ingrain your consciousness that the day is long gone when the Human Resources person was the friend of the employee. I have experienced too many interviews within our offices on Madison Avenue with those highly credentialed company professionals seeking new careers who might have kept their former positions if they had buttoned their mouth with the folks in HR. One eighty-hour-a-week driven public relations director might still be employed if he hadn't repeatedly confessed his desire for "quality of life" to the Wilfred Brimley-looking HR type who commented at a choice time to the boss about, "Howard's lack of long term commitment to the business."

In my particular heritage, old timers would assemble at the coffee house no only to consume their thick variations of the beverage, but to turn their cups over to "read" the patterns of the dregs. While this probably did little to guide them accurately, at least they knew enough to worry about their futures and tried to understand the positives and negatives affecting them. What we call signs and signals.

In perilous times like these, it's not enough to watch your back, your e-mail, and nuances in and around the building. Senior management and boards of directors are extremely vigilant about shifts and trends throughout their respective industries. Middle and senior management would be wise to track them as well.

It's a variation of the old saw: when the competition sneezes, you catch cold. The virus travels along many pipelines: trade magazines, announcements on the business pages, even low grade corporate espionage. Like when a major technology company's executives were spending significant time in another part of the country. It preceded their acquisition of a major competitor from that region. Wholesale reduction of duplicate positions soon followed.

And each day's business publication's headlines change. One company announces layoffs. Another shifts its marketing strategy. A third starts shedding subsidiaries. Each move is analyzed by rival organizations in war room atmospheres. Often, a rival will divulge his company's policy and strategic direction through something no less (seemingly) innocent than published speeches before community organizations.

Another glaring example: the CEO of a plastics subsidiary in a giant conglomerate in Connecticut once told me that he avidly read his principal rival company's house organ, which regularly reported their greatest breakthroughs and plans in each issue. It was enough to serve as a navigational guide for his policies and directions to effectively counter their product and service innovations.

Another senior executive I know, while being courted by the Hertz CEO away from his job at Avis, was told that every issue of the Avis house organ was avidly read at Hertz headquarters. "I learned everything I had to know about my chief competitor from their own bragging to internal staff," he said.

This intelligence can save your job. Because when the time comes to consolidate or reduce head count, new lists are drawn for corporate cannon fodder.

Know who draws up those lists. Learn how to avoid getting listed. There's no simple formula here, because no two people or their possibilities are even remotely alike.

An acquaintance at a major East Coast utility knew that troubles were on their way and learned all she could about the chief magistrate of downsizing in her organization. Upon discovering his love for cycling on a Sunday afternoon in the park, she virtually stalked him on a rented two-wheeler and staged a biking accident in front of him. As he tended to her medical need, she maneuvered the "introduction" to share her story, i.e. how this was a rare outing from a job which demanded long hours of dedication to keep up with the workload and to do double-work to cover for less competent associates.

Access the playing fields of the decisionmakers as creatively as you can, or doom yourself to being relegated to the "bench."

Watch for Impending Layoff Signals from the Gatekeepers

Corporate cultures scatter signals from many directions, well beyond the memo from the CEO, the overbearing consultant, and fallout from the competition. Action - or inaction - by those who sit at smaller desks for lesser pay can be equally revealing. Bear in mind that corporate power includes the gathering of perks and conveniences. The "people part" engages a familiar roster: the private secretary, security guards, receptionists, maybe even a personal driver. Sometimes vendors and suppliers get into play.

Administrative assistants type confidential memoranda. They lunch with receptionists. Guards and drivers frequently eavesdrop on sensitive matters, in hallways, on car phones, and in elevators. Some who vend and supply artfully maneuver to access corporate decisionmakers at church, charity and neighborhood activities.

So it suddenly takes three calls for an appointment with the boss, when one would always do - that's a sign. No more eye contact from the receptionist? Maybe she knows something you don't about your employment status. The guard no longer booms a cheery greeting? Maybe he's heard that you're about to be fired. Your supplier, the boss's neighbor, takes his coffee to other tables in the cafeteria? Maybe your boss has already told him that he's planning to let you go. Breaks in patterns of office behavior signal something wrong. If it's not your deodorant, it could be your status.