

When colleagues disappoint us, is punishment appropriate?

Sometimes we get angry at colleagues who disappoint us, and a natural reaction can be to do something that amounts to punishing them. While many different situations are possible, the case below has been selected as an example that helps elucidate collegial principles. Note that we are not referring to disappointments that are in fact destructive and break the law. We are considering lesser disappointments that could result in a loss of confidence or perhaps indicate a need for training and help. It may be a disappointment where you strongly don't like what happened, or where someone did not follow your advice.

Imagine a case where a colleague, Dr Vic, comes under attack for some reason by colleagues and is blacklisted. He is told by the blacklisters (Some of them are senior and powerful) that there is nothing he can do, and that if he tries to get a lawyer involved, it will only be worse for him. Dr Vic, in spite of attempting many solutions, fails to ward off the blacklisting attack which he feels was overwhelming. The blacklisting took the form of bullying, demonizing, avoiding, and denying Dr Vic full recognition for his outstanding work.

A very key thing is that the attack was not warranted; Dr Vic did not do what the attackers say he did. But, they will not listen to his side of the story and look at the evidence. Moreover, an aspect of the attack is an expression of unhappiness with Dr Vic's boss; in other words, the attack is partly aimed at the boss but focused on Dr Vic. Dr Vic is caught in the middle and suffers great stress, a damage of reputation and the loss of much.

Dr Vic's boss actually knows that Dr Vic didn't do what he was accused of, but nevertheless he has a somewhat different reaction to it all. He felt let down and embarrassed by Dr Vic's failure to stop the attacks, and almost considers it a personal wounding. Significantly, the boss feels that the attack could have been easily fought off and he is disappointed in Dr Vic. He tried to provide help, even a lawyer, but Dr Vic feels the help was way too little and far too late. Moreover, Dr Vic is concerned that the boss is not sincere in his effort to help.

As the years go on, the blacklisting continues in spite of the existing evidence that he was not guilty. Behind Dr Vic's back, his boss inexplicably supports the blacklisting and even tells others to do it! Perhaps the boss was afraid that he too would be blacklisted. Many people are struck by the destructive position that the boss has taken. It is mean spirited and punishing. In what seems cruel to Dr Vic, the boss will not even discuss the situation and denies that there is anything wrong at all!

When asked why he couldn't or didn't stop the blacklisting, Dr Vic says that: 1) Everyone seemed to go along with it and nobody seemed to have the courage to stand up and support

him. Potential supporters were threatened and bullied by the blacklisters. To carry out a legal action, he needed others to testify, but they would not. He felt that he was without support and helpless. 2) The blacklisters, including his boss, were very powerful people. 3) importantly, Dr Vic also says that he was overwhelmed with stress. He says he suffered some kind of stress syndrome to where he was paralyzed by inaction and felt the guilt of being a victim. 4) He also said that he thought that people would soon see that he was falsely accused – but they didn't seem to.

OK, let us consider the issues in this case.

First, blacklisting has been discussed thoroughly in another essay on this site (“Blacklisting, but who is black?”). It is clearly unethical and denies due process. If Dr Vic did something wrong, he should have been confronted with the facts and given an opportunity to make amends. But he wasn't. Instead he was bullied, demonized, avoided, and lied to.

As an aside, human beings, for whatever reasons, are susceptible to demonizing others. Perhaps it is a weakness of human nature. But, if we have learned anything from the Nazis and others, we need to be very careful about supporting or carrying out demonization.

Second, Dr Vic's boss seems mean spirited and inappropriate in his actions. Even if he is correct that Dr Vic could have avoided or reduced the blacklisting, it doesn't do anybody any good for the boss to support the blacklisting. He could have done some good by simply saying that the blacklisting action was inappropriate and why; instead he joined in with the blacklisting and all of its ethical problems.

Perhaps it is true that Dr Vic failed, although that is not clear to everyone. The boss could have simply said that Dr Vic is a failure in this, needs help, and is in emotional shock. That would have been closer to the truth and elicited compassion instead of inappropriate blacklisting. Even if Dr Vic did fail, the continued blacklisting served no purpose and brought no good. What was the boss thinking? Could it be that he was blacklisting his underling to avoid bringing attention to his own transgressions? Did he think that he was so far above it all, so much of a god, that Dr Vic should never have failed him in any way – did he truly feel that this failure (which was punishment enough) was punishable? The boss was definitely guilty of what he found so intolerable – a failure, another kind of failure, but nevertheless a failure. It seems reasonable to perhaps lose one's confidence in the capabilities of such a colleague and maybe change his job assignments. But continuing the destruction is not appropriate.

Let's consider a third aspect of this case. Supposing you are in a situation that will result in harm to you, and you apparently do nothing. Are you partially to blame for the harmful

consequences? After all, you didn't protect yourself. Most people say yes, you are partly to blame, and that seems reasonable.

However, all the blame for the injury does not fall on the victim. Consider the law. The law does not assign blame to a victim and relieve blame from the perpetrator. According to the law, if you do harm to someone, particularly if it is intended, then you are culpable. The perpetrators (blacklisters in this case) deserve the punishment of the law regardless of the lack of self-protective actions of the victim.

Ethics can provide a view that is somewhat different from the law. It seems that if a victim fails to protect himself/herself - and if it is truly that simple with no extenuating circumstances - then he/she bears some responsibility for the ensuing harm. But the perpetrator still bears major responsibility for that harm. If you harm someone, then an ethical debt has been incurred.

Collegial ethics advocates fairness and the supporting of others. Collegial ethics would have suggested different actions and outcomes for Dr Vic, his boss and everyone else. It would have been an outcome where Dr Vic was not harmed or harmed less, and where the boss appeared compassionate and generous, and where the blacklisters did not make "black" fools of themselves. Everyone would have suffered less damage. Everyone would have been better off. In general, punishing someone simply because they disappoint us is not appropriate.