

Six Subtle Signs You're About to Lose Your Job

For Busy and Confident Executives, These Warnings Are Easy to Miss



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Steve Walker, a veteran executive for [Safeway Co.](#) [SWY +0.17%](#), figured his long tenure offered protection from a layoff. He figured wrong.

He lost his job as vice president of corporate retail services last November amid cost cuts at the supermarket operator. Mr. Walker now realizes there were warnings. For instance, he says, his usually friendly boss turned terse during his final months.

Mr. Walker's surprise over his sudden dismissal is hardly unique. Many highly confident executives miss subtle signs that they're on the way out.

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Jill Abramson, the fired executive editor of the New York Times, has said she didn't see her ouster coming. *Getty Images*

[Jill Abramson](#) got abruptly fired in May as executive editor of the New York Times -- an ouster that she didn't see coming, she said in a TV interview Wednesday. About 70% of unemployed executives now counselled by Shields Meneley Partners overlooked or ignored cumulative clues about the falling ax, estimates Gail Meneley, co-founder of the career-transition firm. The improved economy makes senior managers "less sensitive to reading the signs of trouble," explains Hugh Shields, its other founder.

Increased time pressures further hamper executives' awareness about an imminent job loss. They frequently admit later that "the signs were there. I was too busy trying to get things done," reports Dee Soder, managing partner of CEO Perspective Group, an executive-advisory concern.

Prompt recognition of shaky job security might help executives win richer exit packages and mount better employment searches, experts say. Here are six warning signs, gathered from nearly 20 outplacement advisers, leadership coaches, executive recruiters and layoff victims.

Your boss refuses to discuss your long-term projects.

Last year, the marketing vice president of a small maker of consumer goods wanted to hire a booth designer for a trade show that was eight months away. His employer showcases new items at the annual event.

The chief executive balked at approving the show budget for at least 30 days, however. The VP "didn't connect the dots," recalls Laurence J. Stybel, co-founder of Stybel Peabody Lincolnshire, a Boston leadership consultancy who advised the manufacturer. "That should have been a warning sign."

The man lost his job two months later. The lesson? Watch for significant shifts in your supervisor's decision-making process.

Rumors fly about a hunt for your successor.

The leader of a technology consulting business secretly hired recruiters last year to find a replacement for his operational chief because he wasn't doing well. Hearing about the hunt, the man confronted the chief executive. "Are you looking to get rid of me?" he asked.

The CEO replied, "You're absolutely right, and you're fired," recalls Richard Chaifetz, an acquaintance of the CEO. He runs ComPsych Corp., a provider of employee-assistance programs.

The head of a Wall Street firm once pretended to seek a successor for an underperforming division president, hoping to scare him into improving results. The executive caught wind of the rumored search, and "he came around real quick," says Windle Priem, a retired Korn/Ferry International recruiter who refused the sham assignment.

Colleagues shun you.

It's worrisome when associates shorten their eye contact or exclude you from key meetings, email and work trips. But this sort of warning sign can be less obvious.

An executive vice president briefed by Mr. Walker last summer wanted a follow-up session because "things we were doing were very important to him," the former Safeway official remembers.

Despite weeks of effort, "I could never get that second meeting scheduled," Mr. Walker continues. "That was a subtle message." He believes the executive VP knew about the looming layoff because he worked closely with Mr. Walker's boss. Safeway declined to comment.

You must justify your job.

A senior executive at a producer of food ingredients switched roles 18 months ago. During a performance review six months later, his boss appeared clueless about his altered duties or accomplishments.

"I went home and started thinking, 'How can he not know what I am doing?'" the executive recalls. "It was a subtle thing."

In March, his boss decided that "this role is not for you," and asked him to retire this summer.

Your supervisor suddenly interferes with your employees.

A communications executive at a major bank was surprised when his out-of-town boss inexplicably showed up three times in a few months and helped lead his staff meetings. "She asked everyone's opinion but mine" during those meetings, he observes.

Soon after her third visit, she eliminated his job -- and offered a less powerful post. He quit.

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