

SIMPLE SABOTAGE

Sabotage has been an effective and strategic tactic in wars and conflicts across the ages. Wanting to cripple the entire war engine of the enemy, saboteurs aim to disrupt supply chains, strategic locations, logistic routes and manufacturing to bring the enemy to its knees. Although many of our TV shows and novels depict these saboteurs as spies or people full of cunning strategic brilliance, the truth can be rather different. In fact, saboteurs are not always an obvious or visible enemy, they are not ‘other people’, sometimes, we are the saboteurs.

The United States Office of Strategic Services (known as the OSS) was the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency, or The CIA as we know it today. During World War 2, The OSS, released a ‘Simple Sabotage Field Manual’ issued to citizen saboteurs living in Nazi occupied countries. Declassified in 2008, reading the pages of practical advice today is an eye-opening experience. At a national level, The US government were asking citizen-saboteurs in the workplace to show ‘purposeful stupidity’ and to perform small acts of rebellion. Although undermining on a small, personal scale, the plan was that as more citizen-saboteurs did this, the greater the damage to the enemy in plain sight; it would be subtle and undetected.

You may well crack a wry smile as you hear some of the advice to citizens to bring the enemy down from within their very own workplaces.

When it came to organisation and conferences, this is what the citizen- saboteurs were advised:

- Insist on doing everything through “channels.” Never permit short-cuts to be taken in order to expedite decisions.
- When possible, refer all matters to committees for “further study and consideration.” Attempt to make the committee as large as possible — never less than five.
- Bring up irrelevant issues as frequently as possible.
- Hagggle over precise wordings of communications, minutes, resolutions.
- Refer back to matters decided upon at the last meeting and attempt to re-open the question of the advisability of that decision.
- Advocate “caution.” Be “reasonable” and urge your fellow-confererees to be “reasonable” and avoid haste which might result in embarrassments or difficulties later on.

The advice to managers was as follows:

- In making work assignments, always sign out the unimportant jobs first. See that important jobs are assigned to inefficient workers.
- Insist on perfect work in relatively unimportant products; send back for refinishing those which have the least flaw.
- To lower morale and with it, production, be pleasant to inefficient workers; give them undeserved promotions.
- Multiply the procedures and clearances involved in issuing instructions, pay checks, and so on. See that three people have to approve everything where one would do.
- Multiply the paperwork in plausible ways. Duplicate files.

And then for employees, this is perhaps the clearest advice.

- Work slowly
- Contrive as many interruptions to your work as you can.
- Do your work poorly and blame it on bad tools, machinery, or equipment. Complain that these things are preventing you from doing your job right.
- Never pass on your skill and experience to a new or less skillful worker.
- Pretend that instructions are hard to understand and ask to have them repeated more than once. Or pretend that you are particularly anxious to do your work and pester the foreman with unnecessary questions.

The general advice given to have the best chance of destroying morale were:

- Misunderstand everything
- Act stupid
- Cry and sob hysterically at every occasion especially when confronted by government clerks.

It's subtle, it's deliberate, it appears innocent, it can be easily denied or covered up and it sows seeds of utter chaos and dissension that no workplace could ever hope to recover from.

Citizen sabotage took its toll.

Most of us are not fighting a war. We haven't been asked to become citizen saboteurs for a bigger purpose of defeating an enemy. We haven't been asked to play such a risky game. Yet, we still can become saboteurs ourselves or may be working with people who are.

Whether you call the concept of undermining deliberately 'citizen-saboteurs' or 'cultural assassins', we know that it does damage. That is, after all, why it was, and probably still is, an effective strategy in conflicts.

But how do we know the difference between someone who is trying to sabotage our school culture, relationships and effectiveness, from someone who is really struggling and whose behaviour has started to become damaging? How do we find out what is really happening and what is causing it? Although we can make stereotypes of people who are plotting and scheming against us to bring us down, it is rarely as simple as that. All of us are complex, all of us have things that we are dealing with and sometimes, it impacts our behaviour. It doesn't make it right, but it can start a conversation.

And what about our leadership? Are WE the saboteurs without even knowing it? The list from the Simple Sabotage Field Manual may, at times, describe what is happening in our workplaces. The advice to managers, in order to ruin their workplace deliberately was to:

- "Sign out the unimportant jobs first". Are we ever guilty of that? Getting the bitty things on the list done but never getting to the big strategic things that really need our attention?
- "See that important jobs are assigned to inefficient workers". Do we equip people to be efficient or are we, inadvertently setting people up to fail?
- "Send back for refinishing those which have the least flaw". Are we picky? Is our perfectionism crippling other people?

- “Multiply the paperwork in plausible ways. Duplicate files”. How is our paperwork in school? How about our meeting schedule? How do we communicate efficiently? Are we lighting metaphorical fires in people’s hearts or putting them out with all our documentation?

If we know people who have become cultural saboteurs in our organisation, of course we have to address it, we would be sabotaging our own leadership if we didn’t. But at the same time, let’s also make sure we put ourselves under the microscope, and ask, ‘are we making things worse’? Are we the ones who are sabotaging, perhaps accidentally?

Most of us do not want to cause damage to others or to sabotage the efforts of our teams or school, but sometimes we might be, without even knowing it. Here are 3 questions for us to think through ourselves.

- 1) How clear have you made your cultural expectations in your teams? Do people know what the behaviour of ‘cultural architect’ looks like? Is there a charter or culture canvas or whatever else you may call it, in play?
- 2) If you have this document, how often do you revisit it? What about the new colleagues who are joining you? How will you ensure that everyone knows what you stand for and against so that sabotaging is less likely because the standard and expectation is clear?
- 3) In any conflict of 2 sides, both usually think they are right. How curious do you allow yourself to get to understand the issues behind sabotaging behaviour? How brave are you in having the crucial conversations?

So much of our leadership is thinking about the behaviours of others. But let’s not forget to have a long look at ourselves too. Are WE still leading as we hoped we would before we were in this seat? Are we STILL committed to helping everybody thrive, without obstacles?



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