

Forced out

By Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

You've been with your company for years, and have always been considered an excellent employee. In your recent performance review, your new boss said you were doing a bad job. You can't sleep, and you don't know what to do.

It's entirely possible you're being forced out of the company. This is almost always associated with change, and it tends to happen under these circumstances: (1) Your new boss "inherits" you from the previous supervisor; you weren't hand-picked to be on this new team. (2) Someone who doesn't like you now has power over you. (3) One of the bosses has said - however illegally - "We need some fresh blood around here." That usually means "younger."

You are right to feel you have a target on your back. Anyone in authority would look shocked if you asked about it, but this is a time-honored and mostly effective strategy. Here are some of the ways it applied in organizations: (1) You're a great employee who is suddenly considered marginal or ineffective, and you find yourself being called on the carpet a lot. (2) You're being micro-managed. You may in the past have been quite independent, but no more. You practically have to raise your hand to go to the bathroom. Your boss second-guesses everything you do; asks for daily or weekly reports to "keep up." (3) Your authority is either reduced or removed. You may have run an office, or a division or a product. Now you have an office that's far from the action, you have a title that means nothing, but is clearly less than the one before, and the only thing you're managing is the houseplants.

What happens to *you*? You would think people would recognize this as a squeeze play and be able to deal with it. Few can, however. You often believe others more than yourself, so you give your boss more credence than you should. While your senses tell you you're better than that, and you may even become angry, you also become hypercritical of yourself and start to buy the boss' bad PR about you (and we all have enough performance weaknesses, it's not as hard as you think). Because you're being second-guessed, you make fewer good decisions. You stop trusting your abilities. Because pushing you out of the loop was so public and obvious, you feel ashamed and in pain.

Most people who undergo this tend to leave. They may get mad and leave within a couple of months. They may wait to be forced out in a more public way, and that can take a couple of years. They correctly perceive they have little control here.

You cannot bulletproof against this. You can blunt the effect of it if (1) you have friends as or more powerful than the ones trying to force you out; (2) if you've talked with an employment attorney who's told you the company's discriminating against you (though I wouldn't bet on this; it's hard to prove and endless to pursue); (3) if you have the mental and emotional fortitude to wait this out, and you get lucky with another, more favorable, organizational shift in two or three years.

If you feel you're being forced out of the company, go talk with a counselor or someone who understands your business and situation. You need to develop answers to these key questions: (1) What makes me think I'm being forced out? (2) How much time do I have before the axe falls? (3) How can I keep my bosses (perhaps others) at bay till I can either get another job, or till this situation passes? (4) If I think I'm being discriminated against, what is an attorney telling me are my options? (5) How can I keep my spirits up while I get through this?

Good luck. This is one of the toughest situations you can find yourself in.