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## *Strategy #31*

### Deal With the “Back Off” Before it Turns Antagonistic

Have you ever experienced one or more of these situations at work?

- You agree to work together on a project—you even have this person’s commitment in writing—but now he won’t answer your e-mails. You are being ignored.
- You used to communicate on a regular basis but now you can’t remember the last time you heard from a particular individual.
- You received half of your fee up front and the project is now completed. You are supposed to receive the second half of the fee but communication between you and your client has become one-way, even though he initially happily accepted your work.
- You and your coworker used to be friendly toward each other but lately you’ve felt like you’re getting the cold shoulder.

These are just a few of the many examples of what I call The Back Off, a very annoying phenomenon in business that has become increasingly widespread. Rather than have a confrontation, someone backs off. Rather than risk having a discussion that might be unpleasant, there is no communication. Rather than rejecting a person or a project, there is silence. (The example above, the backing away from an agreed-upon fee, will be dealt with in Strategy #40 in Chapter 6.)

What causes the back off and what should you do about it? Ignore it? Confront it? Try to turn it around? The first step is to figure out why the back off might have occurred. Is the person busy? Did something happen between you that could be going on?

Here are some reasons that the back off is happening:

- You took too long to return this person’s phone call, or e-mail, and now he or she, consciously or not, is determined to make you wait.
- This person is very busy and just can’t get to you for now (but he or she doesn’t know how to say that politely so avoiding you seems to be the better option.).
- This person has not received your phone call or e-mail because he or she is on vacation, no longer at that job, or has unwittingly erased or ignored your message.
- You are just not on this person’s radar screen right now.
- This person is truly overwhelmed and swamped and he or she just can’t get through the hundreds of e-mails or dozens of voice mails that need to be dealt with. Only urgent or priority communications are being acknowledged.
- You angered this person, and he or she does not know how to tell you.

You probably want to avoid a dramatic confrontation with the back off because you can’t “make” someone want to deal with you just by pressuring them or bombarding them with calls or e-mails. But you can certainly try to increase their motivation to deal with you.

Here are some suggestions for dealing with the back off:

1. Try to communicate in another way. If you usually e-mail back and forth and your e-mails are being ignored, try picking up the phone and calling. It is amazing how often this simple change in how you communicate, even internationally and across time zone, can break through the back off.
2. Give someone the benefit of the doubt. There could be things going on in the business or personal life of your associate that are causing him or her to back off and it could have nothing to do with you. Be patient but still try to keep the communication going even if it seems to be more one-way than two-way for a while. Without being a gossip or a spy, see if you can find out from other sources such as reading any updates about this individual in the media or on the social networking sites that you both belong to that might help you understand why the communication has stopped. Perhaps he or she has just been laid off, is on maternity or medical leave, or is on a seven-week business trip without access to e-mail or the phone.
3. Send another communication in another format and without laying a guilt trip on your associate, just letting him or her know that you would like to hear back when he or she has the time.
4. Instead of just sending a “what’s up” type of communication, or message, have something new and timely to share. For example, send an article or a piece of information that might be useful so you keep the information flowing without being overbearing.
5. If you work together, see if you can get together in person, for lunch or for a drink, to reestablish communication. If you do business together and you are far away from each other, still try to set up an in-person meeting, even if it’s down the road at an upcoming conference or trade show that you are both attending.
6. Shift your energies to finding someone else to deal with instead of obsessing on the back off. In time, this person may get back to you and pick up where you left off, or explain why he or she backed off, or the contact may be lost forever. But at least you are moving your business and career along rather than continuing to fixate on him/her.
7. Help this person out showing in a concrete way that you care about this person and want to assist him or her in succeeding. Send business his way, offer to write a recommendation at one of the social networking sites, or even send a copy of a book or article you have read recently letting this person know that you found it enlightening and you thought he might, too.

#### THE SILENT TREATMENT

This is a variation of the back-off and must be handled just as sensitively.

The silent treatment is one workplace strategy to avoid—it is impolite, it can truly anger people, and most importantly, it is cruel. Of all the ways to end a relationship, being ignored is (arguably) the one that generates the most negativity. The silent treatment is when someone you have been regularly exchanging e-mails with stops returning your most recent e-mail. Your phone calls are ignored as well.

What should you do if someone does the silent treatment toward you?

- Try to connect with them in another way than you usually do. If your e-mails are ignored, try to send a fax. If you fax is ignored, try to set up an event or a required business interaction that will motivate them, or draw them out, so you can resume communications.
- Don't take it personally, even though it feels all too personal. They are either busy, stressed out, there are things brewing behind the scenes you are not privy to, and unfortunately too many are feeling that saying nothing is better than saying something that might be wrong.
- Get the hint that things are not going well for you with this person or these individuals and that company and start looking for new contacts, jobs, projects, or work connections that will be responsive and mutually beneficial.

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