

## **TREASON OR REASON**

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*Ben is at a turning point. He has worked selflessly at a startup, but office politics and a lack of pay have led him to a place where he must choose between staying the course or quitting. A large multinational has been wooing him because he has the company's intellectual secrets in his head. If he stays the course, he may be part of something great. He will likely gain fame and fortune as a pioneer in the field. It is likely that he will become president of the organization someday. But none of this is guaranteed. If he leaves, he will betray those with whom he has worked for all of these years. He can have everything he wants now if he is willing to turn on his colleagues. Should he stay or should he go?*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Ben is conflicted. He joined a revolutionary east-coast startup after 7 years of working in the industry. It was all he knew other than a short stint as a pharmacy assistant. He truly believed in the company and its mission. He was all in, but organizational politics have brought him to a difficult decision.

### **MAKING A NAME**

Ben was a rising star in the company. He moved from one success to another, but the powers that be didn't seem to appreciate him.

His first assignment was a raging success. He volunteered to work with Ethan on a project in New York. This was one of the company's first big wins. It was not the biggest; the project at Boston was the biggest. But everyone agreed that the New York project was just as significant and Ben had shown himself to be an effective leader.

When he sought to take on a new project, he was passed over, but that did not stop him. He lobbied his boss, George, for the opportunity to work on the project, and eventually George granted his request and gave him a promotion.

He briefly worked with Richard on a joint-venture in Canada. It did not go as planned. Richard quit and Ben's health was affected, but he earned the respect of his colleagues and another promotion.

His next project did not go as well, either. The competitive environment was such that success was unlikely. Against all odds he salvaged a bad situation without losing his shirt. Nevertheless, this project felt like a major setback.

He was then assigned to David's failing project in Ridgefield, Connecticut. David was badly understaffed and he left the company. The project was only saved due to Ben's superb leadership. Ben wouldn't have classified it as a win, but he again averted disaster. These experiences were frustrating, but it was nothing compared to what happened next.

### **PROVING HIS WORTH**

He was assigned to work with H. L. Gates in New York. H. L. was a retired executive in the industry, and arguably the most experienced member of the company. He was openly contemptuous of the president. He felt that he could do a better job, and in some ways, he was right. He was an excellent administrator and he had created much of the company's infrastructure, so Ben was pleased when found out that he was to work with H.L. on one of the company's most important projects. But pleasure soon turned to disappointment.

After disagreements over the direction of the project, H. L. demoted Ben. H. L. then made a series of terrible decisions that nearly destroyed the project. Ben acted quickly to recover the project when all appeared to be lost, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, but again, it cost him terribly as his health declined further.

All those who were witnesses knew that Ben was the hero, but H.L. took all of the credit. To add insult to injury, the board even gave H. L. a bonus, while Ben was ignored. Moreover, this project was critically important because success here brought in a new round of investors that saved the company.

### **CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES**

Ben was a bit of a polarizing figure, and he knew it. People either loved him or hated him. Some thought he was a true believer; others thought he was corrupt. Ben found the latter charge preposterous. How could he be corrupt when he had sacrificed so much? He had worked tirelessly for years for the company, and he had yet to be paid beyond his expenses. His boss promised that one day, he would be paid in full, but that day was far off in the future.

Shortly after this incident, Ben's circumstances changed. First, he was re-assigned to a desk job in the Philadelphia office. He hated the administrative post. He wanted to be where the action was, and he knew it was not in Philadelphia.

Shortly after arriving he found out that he was passed over for promotion by the board. He could handle being passed over by better men, but Ben was upset because promotion was a purely political process. He argued that he should be promoted, and eventually he was, but at that point, he would be the least senior of the executives. Many of the others were, at least by Ben's account, far less capable than he.

The only good part of the assignment in Philadelphia was that he met and married Peggy. Three months later Peggy was pregnant, and now he had to think about supporting his family. Dissatisfaction with the company rose as did his expenses.

### **TENDERING THE OFFER**

Peggy introduced Ben to an old friend, John, an executive who worked for the largest international conglomerate in the industry. Peggy urged Ben to consider the offer, appealing to his pride and his circumstances. Ben had a lot to offer, but the company did not seem to value him. Besides, he had bills to pay and a family to feed.

Ben believed in the company, but if he stayed with his company, he was not guaranteed anything. It could all vanish. On the other hand, if he joined the multinational, all of his expenses would be paid immediately. He would have an equivalent position immediately, and his prospects of personal and professional success were all but guaranteed. The only difficulty was that Ben knew that he was only as valuable to the multinational as he was because he carried the company's intellectual property in his head.

Ben reasoned that this would be a win for everyone. His company would certainly go out of business, but perhaps it would be bought out by the multinational. At any rate, Ben thought that he had to do what was best for him.

Just before John made the offer, Ben got into some trouble at work. Some of his rivals accused him of mishandling company funds. His boss, George, reluctantly rebuked him for these incidents. These were minor violations, and George felt that he should be applauded for his successes rather than chastised for the petty violations. But the board got involved and politics prevailed. Ben was charged with negligence as he could not account for roughly \$37,000 of the company's funds. He had not stolen anything. He was just sloppy with the paperwork while he delivered on the company's major accounts.

He resigned, but George, recognizing his talent, kept him on. Ben asked to be re-assigned to a different project in New York and he was granted the opportunity. A native of Connecticut, he wanted to be closer to home. It was one of the company's most important projects. George knew that the company was lacking capable leaders and he believed he could rest comfortably knowing that Ben was in charge. Moreover, it would keep him in the company.

### **A FINAL DECISION**

As his role in the company became increasingly unstable, Ben was hedging his bets. He continued to negotiate with the multinational. After he was put in charge of the New York project, the multinational agreed to double what he was owed by his company if only he would come to work for them. His new appointment had increased his value and their prospects of dominating the market. They needed what he knew in order to wipe out their competition.

Now, Ben has to make a decision.

If he goes, he will metaphorically stab everyone in the back—everyone he has worked with, everyone he has led, everyone that has trusted him. He will trade his personal success for the success of the company. But why should he care? The board overlooked him and rivals have undermined him. The work itself has overwhelmed him and his company has underpaid him. Besides, it is not as if they could enforce the non-compete agreement.

If he stays, he has a good chance of becoming the president of the company someday—but someday may never come.