

## BACKSTABBING WITH A CHEF'S KNIFE

María Claudia Panqueva Bernal

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Christy approached her boss, Timothy, and said, **“I hear you want to talk to me”**. They entered Timothy’s office and sat down. She knew this was going to be a serious talk. Timothy began, **“I assume** you have spoken to my boss, Ned. **He was to tell you** that he is and has been aware of your actions in trying to get me fired. No matter what happens to me, **you will never be the Director of Food and Beverage at this hotel.”**

#### Background

Timothy Dawson is the Director of Food Services at the Graham Hotel, a prestigious hotel in a major American city. His resume is impressive. He has graduated from the nation’s best hotel school, has set sales and profit records at his last hotel, and has produced a huge profit at another hotel that was on the brink of closing. His interview, 18 months ago, had gone well. Ned White, the general manager at the Graham, hired him. Ned was impressed with Timothy’s confidence, professionalism, and his positive “can do” attitude. Two months after starting this job, Dawson married and bought his first new home.

Christy Brown, the assistant food and beverage director, has been at the Graham for over five years. She was hired as a cashier, but moved throughout the kitchen, working every position in her first three years. She was promoted to assistant director two years ago. Her former boss left nine months before Timothy Dawson arrived, leaving Christy as the acting director. With no formal education, reaching only the eighth grade, she views everyone with a college education as treating her as if they are better than her. To her credit, she is an employee who is committed to the

hotel, working long hours when needed. She knows her salary is \$20,000 more than she could make elsewhere.

Eighteen of the thirty-five kitchen employees have been with the Graham for 10 years or more. Five of these staff members have been there for twenty-five years or more and have not worked anywhere else but the Graham. No one on the kitchen staff has a college degree or technical training. The average wage for the kitchen staff is \$9.50/hour. Benefits provided by the hotel include two meals per day, five uniforms, four-weeks paid vacation, and healthcare benefits. Twice a year the entire staff is taken out to a gourmet dinner in appreciation for their service to the hotel.

## 2. PROBLEM

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Christy gave Timothy Dawson a few months to impress her with his abilities. Not satisfied with him after the first six months, she started to undermine his authority with the employees. She often spoke openly with the employees about her dissatisfaction with Timothy saying he was lazy, incompetent, and knew nothing about running a kitchen. Fortunately for Timothy, two of his employees were informing him daily of what was being done and said by Christy and the other employees. Timothy was passing this information on to his boss Ned. They decided not to confront Christy for just complaining. They wanted to wait for her to realize Timothy's value. They didn't want to terminate a dedicated employee.

Having worked through a busy weekend, Timothy stayed home on Monday. At 10:00am Ned called him. His employees had demanded a meeting with Ned. He had gone to the kitchen to speak to them. Two or three at a time, the employee's spoke to Ned complaining about Timothy. The complaints were as follows: he did not work enough hours; he did not do the work they expected him to do; he spent too much time in his office; he did not say hello every morning, he ate too much; he gave free food to other department heads; he took the furniture, destined to the dumpster, home with him; he always ended up the old plants when the hotel's gardener bought new ones; he collected wooden pallets; and he spent too much time on his computer. Ned told Timothy not to come to work that afternoon to discuss the situation even though Timothy offered. Ned advised he enjoy his day off. They would talk about it Wednesday at their weekly meeting. Timothy decided it would be best to handle this situation today. Arriving at the hotel, he headed to his kitchen office.

He walked into a meeting between his staff and Ned. Before anyone realized he was there, two employees had said he was an "educated idiot"

and “he does not know how to talk to us”. Timothy stepped into the room and everyone went silent. The boss, Ned, said he had not asked Timothy to attend this meeting, but he was glad he had. Ned invited the staff to express their complaints directly to Timothy. They bowed their heads. One dishwasher stated that he felt he did not get the help he needed when necessary. Timothy answered with a question. “Didn’t I tell everyone that if you need help, all you had to do was ask?” The answer was “Well, yes, but we don’t want to bother you.” Without further comments, Ned called the meeting to a close and all the employees left the room.

Ned and Timothy laughed. Ned explained that he came by to speak with Christy when an impromptu meeting resulted. What the staff didn’t know was that Timothy had already received Ned’s approval on many of the items the staff complained about. Timothy reminded his boss that Christy was turning the staff against him in an effort to get him fired. Ned agreed, but would not let Timothy confront or fire Christy. Ned’s only comment was that Timothy should spend more time talking with the staff and less time in the office.

A week later on the morning of the monthly staff meeting, Christy went to Ned and told him he should come to the meeting because it was going to be “explosive”. Ned immediately called Timothy to warn him. Timothy’s informers had already warned him that an employee was going to confront him in front of the entire staff. To quell the situation, Timothy spoke to the employee and worked out the problem. The meeting was calm and productive.

## **Action**

Ned felt the time had come to meet with Christy. He called her into his office and assured her he was not going to terminate her, but stated that he knew of her actions against her boss. He said, “If Timothy gets hit by a Mack truck, is terminated, is promoted, or quits on his own, you will never become the Director of Food and Beverage. Timothy knows everything you have done and said against him. Because of your dedication to this hotel, I have prevented him from terminating you, at least for now. You need to speak to him.

Christy approached her boss, Timothy, and said, “I hear you want to talk to me”. They entered Timothy’s office and sat down. She knew this was going to be a serious talk. Timothy began, “I assume you have spoken to my boss, Ned. He was to tell you that he is and has been aware of your actions in trying to get me fired. No matter what happens to me, you will never be the Director of Food and Beverage at this hotel. Is that what was said?” Christy, looking at the floor, responded that it was. Timothy

told Christy that he no longer trusted her and any further action against him on her part would result in her termination. “Be careful who you talk to and what you say, because the employees are listening and some are talking to me.”

### 3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

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#### AUSTIN AND SEARLE. Speech Acts

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## 4. QUESTIONS

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1. In terms of Language analysis, which maxims have been broken in the conversation between Ned and Christy?
2. How was the meeting between Ned and the employees driven? Why did Timothy and Ned laugh at the end? In terms of assertive, horizontal communication, how could the managers have obtained better results and effects on the employees?
3. Why did Ned wait so long before having a conference with Christy? What was the trigger that enabled this meeting? Which aspects can be observed in terms of vertical communication?
4. Which actions can Ned take to get Timothy and Christy in agreement towards a main goal? Which strategies can be implemented to improve the working atmosphere? How could each member contribute to have a better corporate culture?
5. How would Christy affect the organizational weather and the productivity levels? How could the company help her to improve?



