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Breadcrumbs, ghosting and conscious uncoupling at work

By Kate Neilson

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These new terms, common in the world of modern dating, also crop up in our workplaces. But what do they actually mean? And what has it got to do with HR?

When someone is breadcrumbing you, or you get ghosted or dumped in a romantic context, it stings, but it's relatively easy to 'rationalise' the behaviour. They just weren't the right person for you, your friends will placate, and fate intervened to remind you of that. Perhaps they really are just "super busy with work right now" or maybe they've been hit by a bus? You're so much better without them.

However, the 'your-so-much-better-without-them' narrative doesn't always translate when these behaviours are exhibited in the workplace because our financial security and professional development is on the line. We are, at least temporarily, far less better off without them.

So how should employees react if these behaviours are creeping into the workplace? And should HR intervene?

All crumbs, no loaf

Breadcrumbing means to string someone along with empty promises. In the [dating world](#), that might be a collection of text messages or dates that lead you to believe the relationship might be going somewhere. However, they never make a firm commitment and, eventually, you realise you've hitched your wagon to a serial bachelor/bachelorette.

In a workplace context, breadcrumbing can look like managers promising employees that a promotion is just on the horizon or continuing to tell someone that they're in line for a salary bump without ever making good on the promise.

These are usually informal conversations and often, from the employer's perspective, function as nothing more than a means to retain an employee with the least amount of effort as possible. Why spend time developing an employee's skills or reward their hard work when you can just pretend you're going to do it very, very soon?

The work-related version of breadcrumbing was popularised in a 2019 *BBC WorkLife* [article](#). In it, the author refers to "intermittent reinforcement" which, according to the organisational psychologist interviewed, is "one of the strongest ways to develop someone's behaviour" - you always want employees to have a next step to work towards. But following breadcrumbs doesn't always lead to a great end result - just ask Hansel and Gretel.

There's a big difference between offering people bite-sized chunks of success to slowly develop an employee and stringing someone along, says Karen Gately, founder of HR consultancy Corporate Dojo.

"The latter is unfair, unethical, disrespectful and dishonest," says Gately.

"People have this attitude about millennials thinking they won't stay [with an employer]. That's nonsense. What they need is visibility of progress. One of the things I often say to employers is don't over-promote people. Give them a couple of steps at a time towards their ultimate goal.

“So if you’ve got a team member who wants to be a manager one day, get them doing some supervisor-related work. That’s visibility. It’s not about dangling the carrot and continuing to move it [or] feeding them breadcrumbs instead of the bread loaf.”

If you genuinely don’t have an opportunity for the employee in the foreseeable future, but you feel you want to offer them something, Gately says to just be upfront; don’t play games.

“If you’ve promised something in the foreseeable future, and that changes, tell [the employee] about it immediately. Don’t wait for that six-month point and then go, ‘Oh well, sorry. We still can’t do it.’

“Negotiate with them about how they can continue to feel like they are learning and evolving, i.e. their CV is getting stronger because they’re in your business learning [and] gathering new capabilities, even if you’re not in a position to reflect that in a job title or formal hierarchical move.”

“It’s not about dangling the carrot and continuing to move it [or] feeding them breadcrumbs instead of the bread loaf.” – Karen Gately, founder, HR consultancy Corporate Dojo.

The short of it is, unless you plan on actioning a promise within a relatively short amount of time, say three to six months, you probably shouldn’t be bringing it up. Often, people are holding out for that promise to be fulfilled and if you hit that three- to six-month mark and haven’t delivered, they’re more likely to jump ship.

Take Bernadette* for instance. She was working at a mid-to-senior level at a top-tier professional services firm. During the pandemic, she was pulled into its COVID-19 response team, working with the firm’s most senior and influential leaders.

Due to her hard work and impressive skill set, the senior leaders sang her praises and she was pulled onto another high-profile project. As a result, her direct manager promised a pay rise and title change to acknowledge her increased responsibilities and great work – she just needed to wait another six months.

Then, six months rolled around and her manager shifted the goalposts again – she had to wait another few months for a pay review. During that time, Bernadette poured blood, sweat and tears into the job. She got to work early; she worked late nights; she joined projects that required her to work on the weekends. She was [burnt out](#) and stressed out, but she was working towards a larger goal which made her feel it would all be worth it.

Then her team went through a number of changes. Some of Bernadette’s colleagues departed from the firm due to disagreements with how the team was being run and the direction of the company. This created an opening for Bernadette to step up a level – just like she’d been promised. In fact, her manager hinted that this was probably the perfect time to make that happen and started putting the wheels in motion.

After doing everything that was asked of her - including preparing a CV, lining up references and going through a formal interview process - Bernadette was unsuccessful in getting the job. She was told the benchmark for the role had been lifted, two days after she was encouraged to apply for it, meaning she no longer qualified.

This was the final straw for Bernadette - she'd been strung along for far too long - and she decided to resign. Her company lost a talented, loyal employee during a time when it desperately needed to retain as much great talent as possible.

"If you break promises you lose trust," says Gately. "If you lose trust you lose respect and when you lose respect, you lose engagement. It's just common sense."

You've been ghosted

[Ghosting](#) has been in our lexicon for a while now. If you've been on a date with someone, and it seemingly went well, then you literally never hear from them again, you've been ghosted, my friend - or all their communication devices died at the exact same time right before they boarded a plane to move to a different country - what are the chances?

At work, this is a common move among some new recruits. If they've had second thoughts about the job, ghosters don't set up a formal meeting to air their issues; they won't even send an FYI email. They will simply vanish into thin air.

"If [a relatively new recruit] just never comes back, either your hiring process is seriously flawed in assessing character or motivation ... or you have oversold the truth around [the job or] your culture," says Gately.

While it's very easy to throw your hands in the air and blame the ghoster for wasting your time and money (setting up and [onboarding a new hire isn't cheap](#)), Gately says it's important to take responsibility for your role in it.

"That mistake is yours to manage. Unless someone has just outright [lied about who they are \[in the job interview\]](#), you need to take ownership of your decisions because perhaps they weren't accurately assessed in the recruitment process."

"I often hear managers say something like, 'Oh, we've got a key project at the moment... We'll get rid of them in six months.' That's unethical. That manager is coming into work every day, looking someone in the eye, and lying to them." - Karen Gately, Founder of Corporate Dojo.

The truth is, no organisation's culture is infallible. So when you oversell it to a job candidate, you could be setting yourself up to fail.

Instead, Gately suggests putting all your cards on the table. If you're going through a patchy stage with your culture, be honest about it.

"Through the recruitment process, you might say something like, 'We're really excited about where we're going as a business, but, like any organisation, we've got some challenges to overcome and we need to be real with you about that. For example, right now we're focused on trying to get greater collaboration and greater accountability. So in some areas of the business it could feel stressful, but we've got plans to fix it.'"

If you needed to allude to more specific issues, such as certain employees who might be [disgruntled](#), Gately says to tackle this through the onboarding process.

"I would say something like, 'If you run into obstacles or have concerns, please come to me because the harsh reality is not everyone is happy right now. That's very human. Some people are feeling the pain of change, so if you find that really draining, come and see me.'"

Consciously uncoupling

Often the reason an employer is breadcrumbing an employee - or the reason employees ghost their employer within the first few months on the job - comes down to poor performance that hasn't been managed properly.

For example, if you've hired someone and they aren't progressing as you'd like, rather than invest in helping them to improve, you just let things carry on in the hope things will magically resolve themselves. No one wins in this situation.

Gately calls this "lazy leadership".

"I often hear managers say something like, 'Oh, we've got a key project at the moment and we just need a bum on the seat. We'll get rid of them in six months.' That's unethical. That manager is coming into work every day, looking someone in the eye, and lying to them."

"In my experience, leaders who make these kinds of decisions are typically really ineffective. That's what they've got this [underperforming](#) person sitting there."

Leaders need to have the courage to tackle these difficult conversations and act with integrity. That process could look something like this:

- Having the [difficult conversation](#) about the employee's underperformance.
- Set up an official [performance improvement plan](#). Or, as some experts would suggest, a [re-engagement plan](#) could be more impactful.
- Outline clear expectations for improvement (including timelines, benchmarks and support mechanisms).
- Offer training, where necessary, to upskill the underperforming employee.
- Ensure leaders make solid intentions as to how they plan to offer the employee support, and encourage them to stick to it.
- Analyse the employee's progress in a fair and collaborative manner.

“Have the courage to engage in honest conversations around performance and support people to improve. If they can't improve, that's okay. Sometimes we've got to go our separate ways.”

(See HRM's [quick guide](#) to legally dismissing underperforming employees here).

If you've followed best-practice protocol and can genuinely say you've done your best to support that employee in their transition out of the business, you're more likely to end the employment relationship on good terms.

Actor Gwyneth Paltrow and her former husband, Coldplay's Chris Martin, popularised the term 'conscious uncoupling' in their very public split in 2014. They couple claimed they weren't getting divorced, which often evokes thoughts of emotionally-charged custody or financial battles. Instead, they were choosing to part ways in a positive sense; they had simply outgrown one another.

Wouldn't it be great if we could all consciously uncouple from our jobs when the time was right? It could save employers money by keeping workplace dismissals and disputes out of the courts and, just maybe, if you've done a really great job, former employees might continue to be advocates for your organisation. After all, Gwyneth and Chris [allegedly](#) still talk to each other every day.

**Details have been anonymised.*