

When to Fire Someone *The Toxic Employee and the Curse of Mediocrity*

@hgivner: *Read ur last ES column on becoming a boss. I have seven employees. One is a problem, but don't have time to find replacement for her. Advice? Mara, Toronto.*

In my last column I talked about becoming a boss and hiring your first employee, and outlined the process for effectively training and ramping up new hires. Alas, not all employees work out. One challenge small business owners face is the hassle of replacing underperforming workers. Larger firms with dedicated Human Resources departments can, and do, manage this process more efficiently.

But with a small business, the owner typically has to do it all: fire the person and find his or her replacement. Most people dread both tasks, the first because it's wickedly uncomfortable; the second because it's a huge, time-consuming pain in the rear. So they end up ignoring the problem, rationalizing that the person's performance is not THAT bad.

The damage a problem employee can do to your company can range from moderate to catastrophic, but in any case it is usually far greater than you think. Let's look at two scenarios.

The Toxic Employee

This is the person (let's call her Toxie) who is unhappy about something (their compensation, their boss, etc.) and develops a chip on her shoulder. But Toxie isn't content with keeping her irritation to herself; she's got to share her misery with others. She whispers in the ears of her co-workers, firing them up. "Can you believe they want us to work on a weekend without paying us overtime?" or "We shouldn't be expected to do this task; let the interns do it!"

Toxie's frustrations aren't validated until she gets others to join her cause and storm the castle. She wants to bring others' morale down to her level, and pretty soon her drama starts consuming more and more of everyone's time. When that happens, she's got to go.

Toxic employees by definition spread their malcontent around the office like a cancer. And like a cancer, they need to be removed before the damage gets worse and more healthy employees get infected. In sports we see examples all the time of athletes that "infect the locker room" and become a bad influence on others; rarely are those teams successful, no matter how good that athlete may be.

The Soft Bigotry of Low Expectations

Sometimes you've got a mediocre employee, however, with a great attitude. Unlike Toxie, this person will be the first to admit when they fall short in their performance. They don't blame anyone but themselves, and they have the support and sympathy of their co-workers, and you, their boss. This is the mediocre/low performer, so let's call him Melo.

Now, you might think, what's the harm in keeping Melo around? There's no collateral damage to others like you'd have with Toxie,

right? Wrong. The risk here is that by keeping Melo around, your A players might be tempted to measure themselves against him, and start settling for A- and B+ performance. Worse, they may lose respect for you because you're continuing to allow someone to stay on who clearly is not meeting the job requirements. Either way, they become a drag on your company's mojo.

In some ways, Melo is a much harder situation, because he's likely to stick around longer. Eventually Toxie wears out her welcome and pushes you to take action. Firing Melo is like giving away a pet that you like but refuses to be house trained. But if you want to grow a strong business instead of a half-way house, you know what you need to do.

Firing Someone

In my 20 years of running an event company I've probably fired eight people, and the only thing worse than firing someone is firing someone who doesn't see it coming. That's a sign that you haven't clearly explained what you expect of the employee and/or given them proper feedback. It's a miserable feeling on both ends of the table.

To avoid this, make sure you lay out, in writing, your job expectations, and give frequent and specific feedback at regular intervals. If the performance problem doesn't improve, be very clear about the consequences that will ensue if it's not corrected. If you do this right, nobody should be surprised when they get fired.

Once you've bitten the bullet and terminated an under-performer, you'll be amazed at the ancillary impact it has on everyone else's performance. It sends a message that not getting the job done will not be tolerated, and the other employees will begin stepping things up. Plus, the replacement worker usually brings fresh energy and drive to the office and you'll notice everyone's productivity will receive a boost.

These benefits, however, are lost on your business if instead the problem worker quits before you fire them. Please understand, I would never advocate taking away someone's livelihood just to boost office productivity. What I am saying is, if you've determined that a worker is no longer a good fit for your company and cannot change, you're better off taking the bull by the horns and proactively dealing with the issue directly. It demonstrates strong leadership and your commitment to high standards for everyone you hire. **es**

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