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## How to Fire an Employee

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Your first order of business shouldn't be showing the employee the door. It should be creating a plan of action to help the employee avoid termination all together.

The question of how to deal with a difficult employee is one of the most frequent questions I receive. By the time I hear the question, people are frustrated, confused and angry. Underneath the rhetoric, the real question is, "How do I get rid of this person?" With that in mind, I think there are a number of reasons that managers have trouble terminating an employee.

1. The organization has a pattern of sweeping incompetence under the carpet. Poor performers are placed in innocuous positions or, even worse, are transferred, so they become other managers' problems. Managers with difficult employees often don't feel an organization such as this will support them through the termination process.
2. They have never seen anyone fired and, if they had, it was a big, messy situation.
3. They are so uncomfortable with conflict that they are unwilling to deal directly and honestly with the problem employee.
4. They feel guilty because the problem employees often have difficult extenuating circumstances in their lives.
5. They worry about legal implications.

Despite the discomforts, dismissing an employee can be one of the most important tasks of leadership you'll face. It can be an opportunity to strengthen or build a culture of respect, accountability and trust--especially in an entrepreneurial environment--or it can foster a culture of fear and secrecy at all levels. Other employees are watching, and how you deal with the problem will set standards or norms in the organization. You are shaping your organization's culture whether you take action or ignore the problem. The

real question is, what do you want your organization's norms related to competent performance to be?

To get us off on the right foot, let's look at the case of Jake (not his real name), a United States Postal Service supervisor in the Midwest. I had an amazing learning experience when I was consulting at Jake's facility. During the engagement, I met Jake tying up the last of the loose ends after firing an employee for behavioral and performance problems. Despite differences in race, gender, management and labor with the fired employee, Jake earned the respect of his peers, the union and staff through careful leadership based on objective accountability and concern for the worker's interests.

As I asked questions, I found that the rest of the team considered it a positive, affirming experience. The union was behind the decision 100%, and Jake himself felt comfortable with the process and knew he'd made the right decision. How could this be?

First, he didn't start out with the intent to fire the employee; he started with the intent *not* to fire her. He felt committed to help her establish positive progress and to learn how to better manage her role as part of the team.

Jake's first step was to sit down with the employee when it became clear that a problem was brewing. He discussed with her the situation they were in, the behavior she had shown that created the situation, and the impact that her behavior was having on the organization. He laid out clear expectations for job performance, and provided her with training, mentoring and other opportunities for success.

He worked with the human resources department and the union to ensure that they had every chance to give input and participate in correcting the problem. Jake documented every step along the way, including successes and failures. Unfortunately, it became clear to Jake and the team that even though she was treated fairly and was given every opportunity to respond in a positive way she didn't make use of those opportunities.

The process Jake followed created a strong feeling of fairness and trust among the workers in his department. The other employees realized that, for Jake, accountability was a non-negotiable job requirement and that they could expect to be treated fairly if they ever found themselves in a similar situation.

Jake's approach shows us that success isn't found by knowing how to fire someone; it's in knowing how to *not* fire someone. The goal always should be to solve the problem, not just to escape a difficult situation. Dismissal should be the last step in a positive process for the leader, employee, team and organization.

The most common mistakes leaders often make when dealing with a potential dismissal are:

- **To treat it as a legalistic, mechanical problem.** If you only are worried about having filed the right paperwork and getting through it without having to call the

security guards, you've probably been thinking of it as a chance to get rid of a thorn in your side, instead of thinking about the best way to solve the problem for everyone's benefit.

- **To wait until a crisis occurs before taking action.** If you can address the problem early, before frustration and resentment are high, the chances for success are exponentially greater.
- **To make decisions based on emotions rather than facts.** We can't fire people based on personality clashes or annoying behaviors. It's got to be about the impact on the organization, accountability and getting the job done. When the decision is fact-based, you remove many of the emotional stressors that arise when sitting down to consider your options.

Our postal supervisor may be unusual in that he knew instinctively how to handle this difficult situation. He felt it to be a personal leadership challenge and, while he knew he'd made the right decision, felt a sense of loss because he wasn't able to help the employee get back on her feet. Consequently, his other employees understood his commitment to them.

Others of us may require some step-by-step advice to make sure we're handling it in a way that strengthens, rather than weakens, the organization and that respects the individuals involved.

The first step is always to communicate with the employee. Ideally, this should be part of a continuing conversation with each employee about goals and expectations, as well as responsibilities. As soon as you start to see a trend of non-performance or behaviors that could have a real impact on your organization, you'll want to present the problem to the employee using the SBI model--the Situation for the presenting problem, the unacceptable Behavior you observed and the Impact of this behavior to you or others in the organization. This makes your expectations transparent.

Engage the employee in problem-solving, asking questions to ferret out the causes and possible solutions. Give the employee the opportunity to establish a plan of action to turn things around, incorporating milestones and measurable steps toward success. This also gives him ownership of the problem rather than you telling him what needs to be done, which leaves the responsibility on your back. After the employee has been given the opportunity to succeed, and if he has shown himself to be unable or unwilling to make the changes necessary for success, he already should be aware that dismissal is the inevitable result of his inaction or lack of success. Firing is a last resort for the organization, but clearly a real possibility if the employee doesn't take responsibility and put forth the necessary effort.

Looking outward to the rest of the team, there are other steps to ensure that the process is a positive one that contributes to a stronger culture. Make sure that you respect the troubled employee's privacy. While other employees don't have the right to know specific details of the dismissal, they should all understand that accountability, respect and fairness are a fundamental part of your leadership style. Most likely, the dismissed

employee's colleagues are quite aware of the problem and are relieved that something is being done to solve it.

You'll want to ensure that the team perceives your actions as being fair, regardless of any personal relationships or clashes that may muddy the waters. Jake's team, for example, knew that the dismissed employee wasn't the victim of favoritism or a personal vendetta. Not long before Jake took action to dismiss her, he had documented a problem with another employee--one who, as it happened, was a golfing buddy of his. The rest of the team saw that single action as confirmation that Jake would treat everyone with the same level of respect and would hold everyone accountable--regardless of his personal feelings.

Dismissals that are the conclusion to a solution-driven and fair process create several positive results for the organization. They allow leaders to model the behaviors they'd like everyone in the organization to exhibit; they incorporate the best interests of the employees, teams and the organization; and--most importantly--they help build a culture of trust and accountability within which employees and their leaders can thrive.

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