

Dealing with Employee Terminations

In a recent workshop I conducted on “The Art of Dealing with Difficult People”, we spent some time discussing terminations. If you’ve ever had to terminate someone, you know how difficult and stressful this can be. (Donald Trump excluded!) Over the years, I’ve developed a leadership philosophy that has enabled me to let someone go in a way that not only is more comfortable, but creates an opportunity for me to develop them and their future.

I believe that most people set out to do a good job. They have the intention of doing well and making a contribution. Therefore, when their quality of work is poor even after I’ve worked with them, trained them, and provided them with the proper tools, I know something is wrong. Here’s the truth of the matter: Generally, the poor quality of work is a SYMPTOM rather than a PROBLEM! What is it a symptom of? Well, it could be caused by one or more problems. Most often, I’ve found that the core problem is that they are in a role that doesn’t match their natural skills very well. They are in a job which requires a certain set of skills and their strengths lie in other directions. Imagine having a creative person in an accounting role, or a people person working in a private office without the ability to interact with others. They would surely become unhappy, their energy level and attitude would diminish, their focus would be lost, and the quality of their work would suffer. It’s only natural. I have often found that by observing someone’s natural strengths and comparing them to the skills their job requires, a mismatch exists.

How does this happen? Aren’t people aware of their strengths? No. Often they are not. Or they think they should be able to do other things. Or they think something is wrong with them. Or they are simply unhappy in their life and don’t know why. Think of how most people end up (especially early in our careers) in the jobs they have or the fields they have chosen. Typically, coming out of high school, we pick college subjects that we’re good at, or we simply take a job because someone offered one to us. There are a couple of consequences to these actions. People end up in a field that they’re good at but don’t enjoy. (Just because we’re good at something doesn’t mean we enjoy it.) Or, they end up in a field because they’ve been buffeted about by life, not because they actually sought an occupation out. It’s very, very common to find people in the wrong kind of job for their natural skill set.

Where is all this leading? One of the most important responsibilities a leader has is to develop others. Somehow, many leaders lose sight of this important role and miss the opportunity. What happens then is that they turn to “discipline” rather than “development”. The truth is that, especially with adults, discipline accomplishes nothing. Most often it either causes someone to become passive-aggressive or it causes them to leave. Neither result helps them, and sometimes a disciplinary course of action can backfire and cause you or your company further problems.

My solution to this is to use a more developmental approach. By keeping in mind that poor work is a symptom and one that is often caused by a mismatch of skills, I simply state the obvious. I’ll bring someone into my office and make this observation. I’ll say, “You can’t be happy here.” Their reaction is pretty consistent. At first, they’re in shock from a statement like that. Once the shock wears off, they pretty much agree. They’ll open up and admit that they ARE unhappy. Then I’ll explain what I’ve observed. I’ll highlight their best traits and skills, and point out how their present role doesn’t make use of them. It’s amazing how they’ll light up by having someone note their good qualities. I’ll help them see that their present job requires different skills.

I’ll follow that up by offering some examples of jobs that would better suit their natural skills. Know what happens? They’ll get this glint of excitement in their eyes and they’ll agree with you. I help them see a better, happier future. I’ll offer to help them update their resume and help them research companies who could use someone with their skills.

Know what happens next? They thank me.

You don't have to take my word about this. I've spoken with a number of leaders who have used this approach, and they relate the same results. I've even heard of former employees who sought out their former manager up to a year later to thank them for pointing them in the right direction.

By the way, make sure you set a time table for the departure of your employee. Allowing someone to linger who is unhappy and who produces poor work will continue to be detrimental. Also, please check with your HR department or HR attorney to ensure compliance with company and government regulations regarding terminations.

Remember, ... Leaders Develop Others.

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