

How to Fire the Employee Who's Holding You Back

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Donald Trump makes it look easy, but the words "you're fired" are always difficult to say. Letting an employee go is painful, and for many managers the process is fraught with sleepless nights and stomach-churning anxiety. But hanging onto the wrong people can ultimately make matters worse for you, your other employees, and your business. Here's how to break the news firmly but gently, so you can put the rest of your team back on track.

Things you will need:

- Nothing, unless you get into legal trouble, in which case it could cost a bundle.
- Several months of planning (if possible) and then 15 minutes to do the deed.
- **Documentation:** Make note of the worker's performance record and keep any communications you have sent about missed benchmarks.
- **A Plan:** Map out when and where it will happen, who will be there, and what will be said. Have a strategy for continuing the worker's unfinished projects.
- **Checklist:** Make a list of items to collect, such as keys, laptop, and passwords.
- **HR Backup:** Enlist a staffer from human resources to brief the worker on continued health insurance, accrued vacation, and final pay.

step 1

Treat Dismissal As an Option of Last Resort

Goal: Make sure the employee has been given ample opportunities to succeed.

Before you lower the axe, ask yourself whether you should really let this person go and whether you've given them sufficient opportunity to redeem themselves. Will more training or guidance help? Is the problem the worker, or the work environment? Along the way, communicate expectations clearly—in person and in writing—and provide sufficient feedback so the worker knows where he stands. Planning and documentation is key to letting someone go gracefully, and it's also the best way to avoid expensive litigation. It's tough to objectively document a worker's surly attitude, but you can address the issue in periodic employee review sessions. Keep copies of those reviews and document performance regularly, indicating how the worker was informed of your expectations, how he fell short, and whether or not he knew that continued failure would result in termination. Performance reviews are important, but no set number is needed. Just be sure to treat every worker equally and even-handedly:

Don't scold the underperformer for lateness if you let another worker get away with the same transgression.

Danger! Danger! Danger!

Flattery Will Get You Nowhere

"A lot of employers fall into the trap of trying to flatter workers [in reviews] with the hopes that problems will go away," says Lew Clark Jr., an attorney at Squire Sanders & Dempsey in Columbus, Ohio. "Workers think the boss is happy, and when they're fired that can create legal problems because they feel that the firing was discriminatory or unlawful." For more detail about the legal issues surrounding employee termination, see ["Firing and the Law."](#)

step 2

Endure Pain Now to Enjoy Benefits Later

Goal: Get over your guilt. Accept that you're doing the right thing and start preparing for the change.

Once you're sure an employee isn't working out, act on that conclusion. "The longer it takes to fire someone, the more you're in danger of losing respect from the rest of the organization," says Monique A. Dearth, a former HR manager at General Electric who's now president of Incite Strategies, a consulting firm in Atlanta, Georgia. "Firing someone is never something we want to do, but it's inevitable, and if you're a leader it's something you're going to have to get used to."

Nobody likes conflict, but while you dither, your company may lose customers, money, or productivity. Tolerating sub-par performance can also impact the morale of other employees. "Managing an underperformer drains resources," says HR consultant Donna Flagg, who spent 15 years as a human resources professional for Chanel, Barneys New York, Donna Karan, and Goldman Sachs. "Other employees will want to leave if they feel they're not being recognized while someone else is doing less and getting a break." It's better to spend your time filling an open position, she adds, than managing someone who shouldn't be in the job.

Don't forget continuity planning, and anticipate what you'll need to do to replace the employee or handle her work flow once she's gone. Will you need approval from anyone above you before firing the worker? Before asking other employees to fill in? Is there anyone you'll want to promote into the vacated position?

Hot Tip

Put the Ball in Their Court

In many cases, when the skills, work ethic, or personality of a worker don't mesh with the rest of an organization, you may actually be doing them a favor by letting them go. In fact,

they may know this as well. So before you fire someone, consider asking if they're really happy in their job, rating it on a scale of 1 to 10. Sometimes, employees will realize on their own that it's in their best interest to move on.

step 3

Set a Time, Date, and Place

Goal: Map out a strategy to make the event as painless as possible.

There's never a good time to tell people they're fired. But if you wait until 4 p.m. on Friday, the terminated employee might question why he wasted his whole week. "Monday gives them an opportunity to regroup and start networking," says Pamela Holland, COO of Brody Professional Development. Likewise, it's best to get it over early in the day, so you won't be distracted by the looming conversation. Cutting ties during lunch hour can be a good idea, because the office will be relatively empty and a fired worker can clean out his desk in private. Plan out the details carefully, considering whether company policy requires that the worker be escorted out of the office and whether he has access to critical company systems. (If so, you may want to back up files before you have the conversation.) Arrange to have the employee's final paycheck ready on the day of your termination meeting.

Give some thought to where you will hold the meeting. Don't go out to lunch or pull a worker into your office, because it can be difficult to end the conversation. Instead, pick a neutral place, such as a conference room, where you can easily walk out when you're done. Afterwards, bring in a human resources representative to handle the final details: collecting keycards, laptops, filling out paperwork, and answering questions about health insurance and accrued vacation. "They can complain if they want, but they'll be sitting there with someone who can't do anything about it," says James Wright, who handled numerous layoffs at tech firms during the dot-com bust.

Danger! Danger! Danger!

National "Daddy Got Canned" Day

In addition to consulting your own calendar, check to see whether the planned termination will fall on a day that may have significance for others. One company didn't think through its firing plan and let a systems engineering manager go on Take Our Daughters to Work Day. Security escorted both the man and his 8-year-old daughter out the door.

Keep It Quick and Clear

Goal: Be direct and don't let ambiguity creep into the conversation.

Though you'll spend a lot of time planning and preparing, firing someone typically only takes a few minutes. Be clear and—harsh though it sounds—use the words "terminate," "let you go," or "fire."

"When people hear bad news, they go into selective listening mode," says Bob Kustka, who handled terminations at Gillette for 25 years. Kustka recalls one manager who told a worker he needed to "move him out," intending to terminate him. The worker walked away thinking he was being transferred to a different job.

You can show sympathy by starting out with "this isn't going to be easy to hear," but keep it simple and stick to the facts. Ideally you will have already had several conversations about the worker's performance, so the news shouldn't come as a surprise. Be clear—"You're being fired because you stole," or "You're being fired because you're not hitting your sales numbers"—but avoid a laundry list of the worker's personal faults. If necessary, write a script and have a checklist of items you need to cover. For example, be sure to tell them when their departure is effective.

The way you deliver the news can determine how the person reacts—and whether they'll pursue legal action. "When they feel disrespected, employees will believe the law has been violated," says Clark, the lawyer. "How the decision is communicated—doing it respectfully and preserving the employee's dignity—can make a difference." If the worker becomes angry or hostile, end the conversation and insist she promptly leave the premises. Avoid an argument by simply stating "I will not argue with you."

Close the conversation by giving the worker credit for the effort she's put forward. Tell her you're sorry this has happened, but that it's what you must do. Depending on the situation, you may also want to show support by offering to be a reference. Stand up, wish the person well, and shake hands. Then introduce the representative from the human resources department and leave the room.

What Not to Do

Common Mistakes When Firing

1. **Don't talk about yourself:** If you say, "I know how you feel," or "I don't want to do this," you seem more worried about yourself than about them. Do not offer advice.
2. **Don't sugarcoat:** Don't offer false praise and tell them all the reasons why you think they're great. It clouds the issue and can be confusing. Pick one genuinely positive thing to say about the person, but do not go overboard.

3. **Don't defend yourself:** Even if you're told you're a lousy manager, resist the temptation to tell your side of the story. Stay calm and redirect the conversation back to the worker and your decision.

step 5

Let the Rest of Your Team Know

Goal: Lay the groundwork for a smooth transition among the workers who remain.

Tell other workers about the termination right away. Flagg says, "Any window [of time] is dangerous. Someone will hear that it happened, and the news will run like wildfire." Just as in your conversation with the fired employee, don't get into big discussions with fellow workers. Instead, explain that "John left the company on Monday" or "John no longer works here," recognizing his contribution to the company but avoiding details of why he was fired.

If you have a team, bring them together that week to talk about their concerns, discuss how to handle the departed employee's workflow, and map out your plan to fill the vacancy. If the firing was an isolated incident, you may want to assure workers that their jobs are not in danger. But if employee performance varies considerably, save your comments for private conversations tailored to each person.

Nitty Gritty

The Kindest Cut

One way to bring compassion to the firing process is to let the person determine some aspect of how they will leave. Some managers offer the fired worker the opportunity to resign. This is usually done with high-level executives, but it may also apply in cases where there's a friendly relationship between the employee and employer.

In other situations, smaller gestures are appropriate. You might give the employee a choice about who will walk him out of the building: you or the HR rep. He should also be able to choose whether he wants to gather his personal belongings now or after hours, and whether he's ready to have the benefits conversation or wants to postpone it to another time, when he's feeling less rattled.