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ARTICLE FIRING

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by Dick Grote

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Years ago I heard the statement, “Discharge is the capital punishment of organizational life.” What nonsense! If our metaphor for termination is capital punishment, no wonder organizations and their managers are so hesitant to fire a poor performer.

The appropriate metaphor? A no-fault divorce. As painful as divorce may be at the time, it allows two people to correct a mistake and move on to a more satisfying future. Handled well, termination works the same way. Here’s how to do it right.

Start by creating a transition plan. Choose the day and the time for the termination deliberately. While experts disagree on when a firing should occur, all acknowledge the importance of having a rationale — a good business reason for your choice of time and day for dropping the ax. Doing it early in the day, early in the week, encourages the employee to get right to work on finding another job and reduces the chances that he'll spend the weekend moping in a black hole or — worse — plotting revenge. Friday afternoons, on the other hand, often create the minimum amount of disruption to the rest of the staff.

Whatever your decision, put company interests first. For months you've probably put up with less-than-stellar performance in hopes that the situation would somehow correct itself. Now that the end is at hand, plan the transition so as to do the least damage to company and coworkers.

Check the succession plan for an internal candidate. You may want to start recruiting and wait to terminate until you've got a replacement ready to go. It may be in your best interests to send some subtle signals to clients and customers that there will be a staffing change soon.

Run it by a jury first. To make sure that you're on solid ground in terminating an employee, imagine yourself defending your action in front of a jury. Assume that you are on the witness stand and the employee's lawyer is attempting to prove that the firing was unjust, unfair, and vindictive.

Look for anything that could be twisted to suggest that the real reason for the termination is not the individual's performance but rather a pretext or personal grudge. Isn't that the real reason why you fired poor Smedley on his birthday, on the day before his tenth anniversary with the company, on the day before his pension vested, on the day his wife went into the hospital, on the day his mom died?

Take it step by step. Bungled terminations usually result from acting without thinking. Before you utter a word, write down the most important things you plan to say and then stick to your script. Recognize what you're up to. This is not a counseling session. It's the announcement that an irrevocable decision has been made to discharge the individual. Therefore:

1. *Get right to the point.* Skip the small talk. Start the termination meeting by saying, "Hello, John, sit down. I've got some bad news for you." By announcing right from the start that there's bad news ahead, you will rivet the individual's attention on what's coming next.

2. *Break the bad news.* State the reason for the termination in one or two short sentences and then tell the person directly that he or she has been terminated. Use the past tense. Say, "Your employment has been terminated," not, "will be terminated." For example: "As you know, Marie, we've talked several times about quality problems in your unit. Last month's report indicated that your department still has the lowest quality index. We have decided that a change must be made, and as of today your employment has been terminated."

When you're telling someone they're fired:

- Don't say, "I understand how you feel." You don't.
- Don't say, "I know that this hurts right now but later on you'll realize that this is the best thing that could have happened." It isn't. It is a very bad thing.
- Avoid justifications ("You should have known").
- Keep a box of Kleenex available.
- Survival is a strong instinct — give it time to work.
- Remember the Golden Rule.

3. *Listen to what the employee has to say.* There are several predictable reactions to the news that one has just lost his job. The most common are shock, denial, anger and grief. Listening to what the employee says will tell you which of the reactions he is experiencing. Your response will be more effective if you know how he is taking the news.

The Four Emotions People Go Through After Being Fired

And how to handle each one.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Acknowledge the emotion</p> <p>Don't debate or defend</p> <p>Repeat and restate the message</p> <p>SHOCK</p> | <p>Make sure the message got through</p> <p>Repeat the message</p> <p>Continue to repeat the message</p> <p>DENIAL</p> |
| <p>Acknowledge the emotion</p> <p>Don't debate the merits</p> <p>Don't defend the decision to terminate</p> <p>Be firm</p> <p>ANGER</p> | <p>Acknowledge the emotion</p> <p>Keep it moving</p> <p>Focus on the future</p> <p>GRIEF</p> |

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4. *Cover everything essential.* Be specific about what will happen next: pay, benefits, unused vacation time, references, outplacement, explanations to coworkers, ongoing projects, etc. This is one time when you can't say, "I'll get back to you on that."

5. *Wrap it up graciously.* It's usually best to schedule the termination meeting at the end of a work day so that the meeting takes place while coworkers are leaving. Close by thanking the individual for her contributions to the company. Walk with the now ex-employee back to her desk and wait while she collects any personal items. Go to the exit together, shake hands, wish her well, and part with both of your dignities intact.

Avoid misdirected compassion. Most managers I know are empathetic and considerate people. But when the need arises to terminate a subordinate their compassion is often misdirected. They become so concerned about the adverse impact on the employee to be discharged that they forget about all the people who manage to do their jobs and meet our expectations in spite of having as many personal problems and difficulties as the terminatee has.

Actually, when slackers and slouches are finally fired, managers usually discover that coworkers are relieved. Their peers are the ones who have had to work harder to make up for their shortcomings and slacking off. When terminations are well justified and professionally executed, the rest of the work group realizes that this is a good place to work.

But when obvious losers and occupational ne'er-do-wells are allowed to continue in their positions unchallenged, the message to the talented and energetic is that this is a place to avoid. Those who can find other jobs leave; the ones who stay are those who prefer an employer with low standards.

A final note: The most common problem with terminations is that they don't happen as fast as they should. Once the decision has been made to pull the plug and start over, don't dilly-dally in the misguided hope that — somehow — things may still work out. They never do. Remember: It's not the people you fire who make your life miserable. It's the ones you don't.

Dick Grote is a management consultant in Dallas, Texas, and the author of *How to Be Good at Performance Appraisals*, published by the Harvard Business Review Press.
