

## Firing done right

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Terminating an employee is not rocket science nor is it anything to lose sleep over if you've done your job. What people management issue gives managers sleepless nights? Without question, it's firing an employee. There are many reasons why individuals are terminated. Some, such as theft, gross insubordination and severe economic difficulties, do not usually give us the most emotional trouble. But when we have to let someone go because of poor performance, we tend to avoid the the situation as long as possible. When we finally talk with the individual, we are unclear and after agonizing endlessly, deliver the bad news. We feel guilty, angry and frustrated and the employee is also angry (unless you offered an incredibly generous severance package) and confused.

Discipline and termination is common sense, not rocket science. If you have done your job, continuing poor performance is the employee's choice.



**Tips when terminating staff**

- Consider consulting a lawyer for advice on the financial consideration you are required to offer
- Avoid having the termination conversation on a Friday as employees may like to start examining their opportunities right away
- The conversation should be short and to the point with no apologies. The time for detailed explanations was during previous discussions
- Have all paperwork as well as monies owing prepared and ready for the employee when they leave
- If possible, have the conversation at the end of the day so that additional privacy is ensured and the individual may gather his/her belongings with a minimum of disruption

### Initial performance conversation

It cannot be stressed enough that this conversation needs to take place as early as possible. A lack of skills, knowledge, or the myriad of other causes for poor performance do not, except in rare cases, go away by them- selves. If done early, the meeting is much friendlier and informal. This conversation should include a description of the problem, specific examples, the effects of the performance on overall organizational success or on other employees, a clear statement as to what you expect, a plan on how to get where the employee needs to be and a plan for follow-up. If you really want and expect improvement, you must be very precise about what good or perfect performance looks like and how to achieve it (through increased awareness, shadowing an employee, training, etc.).

### Subsequent conversations

The follow-up must be done soon after the initial conversation. Exactly when this should take place should have been decided in the initial conversation. The amount of time between the two discussions will depend on what needs to be corrected and how long it may take to see some improvement. For example,

if the problem is untidy appearance or lateness, the follow-up should be several days or a week later. If the problem is poor time management and missed deadlines, a longer period may be needed. But there is no need to wait until the problem has been corrected in its entirety; you need to check in to see if progress is being made.

If, during the follow-up conversation, you see that no progress has been made, try to explore the possible reasons with the employee. Perhaps, your initial diagnosis was wrong and as a result, the plan or solution needs to be modified. Depending upon your perception of the effort being made, you may need to make it clear that if the problem continues, disciplinary action will need to be taken.

### **The disciplinary process**

Every organization should have a disciplinary process in writing that all employees are aware of. Keep in mind that a policy that no one adheres to is worse than no policy at all. A progressive discipline policy, which is probably the most common, consists of three or four steps. The first is a verbal warning, the second is a written warning, the third (and here is where there is some variation amongst organizations) is suspension and the fourth is termination. Each step requires a conversation and should be documented in an employee's personnel file with a signed acknowledgment by the employee. Be clear as to what the next step is.

### **Who does what**

Clearly state who needs to do what. The manager's responsibilities when it comes to discipline are:

- initiating the discussion at each stage
- being clear about what the problem is
- being clear about what is expected
- offering help towards improvement
- being clear about what the consequences are if improvement does not occur.

The employee's responsibilities are:

- participating in the conversations regarding the poor performance and offering explanations for the difficulties and suggestions for improvement
- making an attempt to correct the problem or reporting promptly that correction does not seem possible.

If you have put forth a conscientious effort to fulfill your responsibilities, there is no way you can possibly feel to blame for eventual termination.

If an employee is not able to make improvements despite assistance from the organization, then possibly he/she does not have an aptitude for or sufficient interest in the task at hand. In this case, termination may be a relief. It is safe to say that no one wants to come to work day after day trying to achieve something and failing at it. Termination may be an opportunity to consider options and to choose something more suitable.

If it's clear that the employee could make the desired changes if properly motivated but does not, it follows that it has been his or her choice not to. This likely has nothing to do with you.

### **Termination**

If we assume that you have done what you were supposed to, the termination will not come as a surprise to anyone. In fact, in the previous conversation, it should have been stated clearly that "if by [a particular date], the situation does not improve, you will be terminated." The employee ideally would have signed a document stating that he/ she is aware of potential future action.

### Meeting with remaining staff

- Meet with staff as soon as possible following the termination
- **Tell them that you are not able to share details about the termination due to your respect for the individual's privacy**
- Acknowledge the difficulty for employees caused by this problem and thank them for their efforts
- **Give information about plans for filling the vacant position**
- Invite staff to meet with you on an individual basis to discuss concerns

### The survivors

Equally important at this stage is consideration for the remaining employees. Although they are most likely aware of the poor performance, they may think too much time has passed without action. They may have been carrying the poor performer's load and, as a result, their motivation levels may have slipped because the department has not been a productive and positive place to work.

It is likely they may be happy about the change but will want details around the termination although this information is usually confidential. They will want to know when the position will be filled so they could get back to their own jobs and furthering their careers rather than covering for someone else. You may also need to reassure them that the replacement will be competent and that if they were in the same position, they would be treated with dignity and respect. Finally, even generally good employees may need reassurance that they are not next. Encourage staff to see you individually and don't hesitate to let them know what a good job they are doing and their future is secure.

Firing an employee is nothing to lose sleep over or feel guilty about. Withholding information concerning someone's performance and the consequences for failing to improve, as well as not offering your assistance to remedy the situation, is.

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