

September / October 2006

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## *Facing up to firing*

### **NO ONE GAINS WHEN PEOPLE GIVE LESS THAN THEIR BEST**

**S**OME EMPLOYEE ACTS are so egregious that immediate response is in order. Your employee handbook enumerates them: theft, fraud, insubordination, sexual harassment, etc.

Others fail to rise to that level of concern, yet, like small cancers left untreated, begin to poison the organization. Those latter acts may be committed by otherwise likeable employees and, in fact, may be difficult to pinpoint. (Did Mary really mean to do that?) Yet you know, and the employee knows, that mischief has taken place.

Worse yet, the entire organization knows and is watching to see how you deal with the issue. Most employees want to feel good about themselves, their jobs and their place of employment. Bad actors disrupt that vibe and cause a sense of unease. Their peers are hoping that you will take corrective action and will be in your corner when you do. However, if the offender gets away with his or her transgression, then others may begin to root for the offender.

Not all of the following characters appear in any given workplace, but chances are that any sizeable organization has at least one or two:

**The Obstructionist.** This individual has an endless list of reasons why something can't be done; *e.g.*, it's been tried before and didn't work, customers aren't ready for this big a change, we don't have the necessary resources or time, we lack the information we need, etc. People who are hostile to new ideas or change often have a high sense of insecurity about their own abilities and would rather hide in the status quo than be exposed by

taking risks. Of course, basking in the status quo means eating the dust created by competitors as they gallop ahead.

**The Pot-Stirrer.** Executives who practice "management by walking around" can readily spot the pot-stirrer. Typically the offender is sitting in someone else's office deep in conversation, which stops the instant the boss wanders by. Misery loves company, and the pot-stirrer is always hard at work making sure that others are equally miserable, if not more so. Had they heard that Carmela is getting the promotion Peter deserves? Are they aware that government investigators were in the Legal Department yesterday? What will people do if the company shrinks the merit-increase pool this year? Stop the pot-stirrer before he infects the entire team.

**The Procrastinator.** Ellen is not an evil person, but she simply can't begin any task before the 11<sup>th</sup> hour – a practice finely honed at college during her all-night cram sessions before mid-term exams. Procrastination could be forgiven if it had not meant the slides for a major sales presentation contained embarrassing typos (no time left for proofing) or the deadline for responding to an important RFP was missed (the customer couldn't have been serious about giving us only a week to respond, could he?). Procrastinators *can* modify their behavior, but it takes considerable personal insight as well as will power.

**The Saboteur.** These passive-aggressive personalities are outwardly supportive while inwardly seething with rage. Afraid to address the source of their anger, they sabotage the organization instead.

For example, having promised to arrive early for an important client meeting, Charlie shows up after everyone else is seated in the conference room; surely it's not his fault the alarm-clock battery died. Or Sue, having agreed to meet an out-of-town job candidate at the airport, calls Sunday morning to say she forgot it's her turn to visit Mom at the nursing home. Often, each incident in isolation has a semi-plausible excuse or explanation. It's the pattern of recurrences that lets you know there's a problem needing to be fixed.

The Misfit. Perhaps the most difficult situation, from a humanitarian standpoint, is the good employee in the wrong job. Almost everyone knows one or more stories about a star salesman who, brought in from the field to become a regional manager, failed miserably. Good sales representatives do not necessarily make good managers. If the company has an "up or out" policy, it is destined to ruin at least a few careers, jettisoning some of the individual contributors who made it successful. Other times, the nature of an existing job may change as the corporation tackles new opportunities, addresses new challenges or attempts to consolidate positions and responsibilities; the person who was good at the old tasks lacks the knowledge, desire or capability to perform the new ones. Sometimes we hire someone hoping that he or she will "grow into" the job despite evident shortcomings. When a bad fit becomes evident, the first step toward any meaningful solution is for both manager and employee to agree that the bad fit exists.

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### Can this marriage be saved?

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**L**ET'S FACE IT: managers spend more waking hours with their employees than they do with their own spouses. At work, as in marriage, one comes to see one's compatriots warts and all, and there is a natural inclination to overlook, or at least rationalize, those warts. ("Oscar has caused six secretaries to quit, but he's the sharpest mind we've got.") But while preserving the marriage – or at least the institution of marriage, since so many couples get divorced – helps preserve the species, one can debate whether the same principle holds true at work. Whether due to human decency, legal principles or the agonies of hiring, most employers tend to forgive the first one, two, five or ten transgressions and offer offending employees a second, third or twentieth chance. Yet, when employees give less than their best – or, in fact, go out of their way to

give their worst – they are harming the very institution that feeds them (and quite possibly their families). Problem performers rarely get better over time and are far more likely to get worse.

Few hiring managers wish to cast anyone out on the street, and indeed there are sound ethical and legal reasons for avoiding over-reaction to minor infractions and isolated examples of poor performance. On the other hand, managers need to face up to firing when the problem can't be fixed.

As in dealing with any other kind of employee problem, such as alcoholism or drug use, avoid diagnosing and stick to the end result. ("The misspellings and grammatical errors on the PowerPoint presentation this morning were unacceptable.")

Obtain the employee's agreement to correct the problem, warn that repeated infractions will result in discipline or dismissal, and document the conversation. (This also is a great time to review the employee handbook in some detail, consult with your HR professional and if necessary seek counsel from an employment lawyer.) In the case of the employee who is simply a bad fit, investigate the possibility of an alternative job assignment.

If the obstructionist keeps obstructing, the procrastinator keeps procrastinating, the saboteur keeps sabotaging, and so on, take the action you promised to take. (Nothing weakens authority as much as an idle threat.) Do so, nevertheless, on timing that makes sense for you. If Alice is clearly headed out the door, take the time first to have a trusted search professional begin looking for her replacement.

Firing takes courage, and it is even harder to do in a smaller organization where relationships may be more personal and responsibilities less redundant. Planning and preparation, however, can make the day of reckoning less painful and can help ensure a more seamless transition.

Last but not least, when the day of reckoning does occur, rarely is the offending employee surprised.

– George Snider

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