



WORDS ON WISE MANAGEMENT

It's not me—it's you: how to break up with your employees

by Maria Reed
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Relationships—both personal and professional—can be complicated. Just like first dates, job interviews offer candidates the chance to show a prospective employer the best possible version of themselves: smart, charming, funny, and responsible. As an employer, you ask exploratory questions about a candidate's background, education, interests, and goals for the future to see if it's a good fit. If you both agree that it is, you start a relationship.

Breakup options abound

Sometimes, it's a perfect match. Other times, the relationship isn't as great as you had hoped, and the employee reveals his true self: not smart, not that charming, not that funny, and somewhat irresponsible. In personal relationships, you have a few options for a breakup: You can ghost the other person, send him a text message, meet face-to-face and say, "It's not you—it's me," or have an open, honest dialogue about why you think it's best to end the relationship.

I've seen situations in which employers, rather than taking the "open, honest dialogue" approach, treat their employees unprofessionally and lack any compassion when terminating workers' employment. Some choose to announce terminations via e-mail. Others choose not to tell their employees while they are out on approved medical leave that their employment has been terminated—no call, no letter, no text message, nothing. Such behavior reflects poorly on the organization and leaves the door wide open for a lawsuit.

Treat employees as well on the way out as on the way in

A termination is humbling, even when it's deserved. Blindsiding employees with a discharge will inspire them to seek revenge on social media and in the courtroom. Your employees are an extension of your public relations department. By treating them as well on their way out as you do on their way in, you can prevent embarrassing viral posts and lawsuits. But that's a bonus, not the point.

As a supervisor, you have the responsibility to treat your employees with dignity and respect. While you may not enjoy confrontation, you can fire a poor performer with civility. To do that, you have to accept that no one—from the janitor to the CEO—is perfect. Employees' strengths and weaknesses stand out in different roles and areas. Alert your employees to any issues with their performance as they occur, and treat all employees equally—and document your actions. Praise in public, criticize in private, and consistently give honest and specific performance evaluations.

Ask poor performers, 'Are you happy?'

If an employee continues to fall short in one or more areas, meet with her privately, and ask a simple question: Are you happy with your job? If the answer is no, the solution is equally simple: Discuss whether the job is right for her. If the answer is yes, work with her to determine the reason behind her poor performance, outline areas for improvement, and provide a timeline to improve. If possible, provide metrics and objective expectations.

If, after a few weeks, the employee hasn't made progress, try finding open positions in your organization that could be a good fit. If none is available, schedule an in-person meeting, even if it requires you to travel. Kindly and directly frame the issue as a situation where the employee isn't the best match for this particular job, list her strongest attributes, and encourage her to pursue a role that better fits her skill set and passion. If attendance and timeliness are an issue, suggest jobs that have flexible schedules. Empower the employee to find a job she'll love.

Bottom line

You have the power to make the employment relationship a positive one or a negative one—right through to the end. Wield it wisely.



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