

## 5 Reasons Leaders Struggle to Let People Go (and How to Give Yourself the Push You Need)

### Description

There are many difficult aspects to leadership: from having the best plan, to hiring the best talent, to putting in excellent standard operating procedures, to making decisions around products, pricing, promotion, and productivity measures, and so forth. Yet, to me, one of the toughest decisions a leader must make is letting someone go. In my decades of work with many organizations, a defining trait of the best leaders is the ability to make the uncomfortable decision on when to move someone out of a position and most likely out of the organization. There are very few leaders who don't struggle with this.

Here are some questions I pose to groups when helping them create a great organization. *How many of you have ever let someone go?* Hands go up. *How many of you felt you went too fast in letting someone go?* No hands go up. I find that by the time a leader makes that final decision, they are likely emotionally exhausted. Why is this? Because leaders are human beings and often don't want to let someone go. It is very uncomfortable. There are many reasons for this discomfort. Here are some of them:

- 1. The leader blames themselves for the person's lack of success.** Did they spend enough time with the person? Was the development enough?
- 2. Lack of documentation.** The leader has failed to document performance issues and feels that they will be called out by the employee or human resource department for the lack of documentation. And yes, they likely will be. I find about half of employees identified as not performing up to expectations have no documentation in their file regarding performance issues and/or counseling.
- 3. The belief that the person just needs a little more time or more training.** This is so common. Because leaders have empathy, they hold out hope that more training will make the difference. Yes, if training has been lacking, this may be true. But when does a leader admit enough is enough? A frequent question I receive is *When does a leader know it is time to let someone go?* My answer is *When the leader is working harder at the person's success or more worried about their success than they are.*

When an organization starts to provide development opportunities the results will move up. But sometimes after a while the upward progress stalls and may begin to decline. In studying these companies, I have found that the stalling happens because a small group of leaders are not utilizing the tools and processes that the other leaders are. When digging into the data it becomes apparent that the tools and processes work; after all, most are having success. So why are those few leaders not having the same success?

In some cases, leaders still receive good evaluations despite poor results. This is very common. Many organizations have less than stellar performance feedback systems. When there are no consequences there is no change. Also, some leaders just don't have the capability to achieve the needed results no matter how much training they receive. I spoke at an organization that has provided more development of leaders, and excellent development, than any organization I have ever seen. Yet, some areas were

still lacking in results. My statement was that if a leader does not have it by now, they likely will not get it. This is not to say they are not good people. It's just that leadership is not the right fit for them (or at minimum the role they are currently filling is not right for them). The written comments I received overwhelmingly said, *Thank you. It needed to be said.*

**4. “Who will I replace the person with?”** The fact that no replacement is ready often provides a leader the ability to rationalize not making the tough call.

**5. “What will happen to the person?”** Good leaders care about those they lead. They know the family, the situation. I admire organizations that offer outplacement services to the people they let go.

My experience is that leaders will never be comfortable letting someone go. We get comfortable when we do something over and over. Since letting someone go does not happen often, it will always be uncomfortable.

Here is one way to push yourself to make that tough decision: hold up the mirror. In looking at the company's values and your own, does it feel fair to keep a person who is not performing well? Is it fair to the organization? The coworkers? To the employee themselves? In all cases the answer is no.

The higher up in an organization the subpar performer is, the more at risk the organization is. Once someone is let go, it is not unusual for that person's coworkers to let the supervisor know it was about time, or to say thank you. After they leave, the damage they were creating becomes even more evident. Yes, and the person being let go is being provided the opportunity to be successful somewhere else. While the experience will surely be painful for a while, the person will find a better fit and realize being let go was not the worst thing in the world.

Years ago, a CEO called me and shared with me that corporate was coming to town to meet with him. After hearing more, it was evident that corporate had made the decision to let him go. My suggestion to this CEO was to negotiate the best severance he could get. I added “Someday you will thank them.”

For years this CEO had complained to me how unhappy he was with corporate. So, why did he stay in a job he was unhappy with? He was being paid very well. This is what's often called “the golden handcuffs.”

Today that person has a job he loves.

My final suggestion is to ask yourself what happens when you don't let the person go? The answer will likely be that things will only get worse, that some coworkers will leave or at least want to, and that people will lose respect for you.

Only when the pain of not acting is worse than the fear of acting is action taken. Then we wish we had moved sooner. Don't go there. Just be grateful you took the action when you did and keep moving forward.

#### **Date Created**

March 2, 2020

#### **Author**

quint-studer