

Itâ??s Not the Leaderâ??s Job to â??Ownâ?• an Employeeâ??s Success

Description

A frequent question I receive is â??How do you know when it is time to let someone go for poor performance?â?• This is not about obvious offenses like not showing up for work, stealing, bullying, harassing, etc. It is about the tougher calls.
A good supervisor hopes all employees are successful, but sometimes they just arenâ??t. The person was hired with the expectation they would be successful in the job. Time has been invested in training. If you are the one who hired the person, it means admitting you made a hiring mistake. It may mean admitting you have not documented performance issues as you hoped things would improve. This means starting the process when you have made the decision the employee is not going to work out.
One of the saddest experiences is when a person is let go and they did not see it coming. I find that by the time a leader makes the decision to let someone go, they have agonized over it. They likely know the personâ??s family situation and donâ??t want them to be put in a tough financial spot. They have usually tried many things to help the person be successful.
In my workshops, I ask the attendees, â??Who has ever let someone go for performance?â?• Because the attendees usually have some years in management, most hands go up. I then ask, â??In thinking about letting someone go, do you feel you moved too quickly?â?• No hands go up. Why do we delay letting an employee go? There are a few possible reasons.
Often, a leader takes so much ownership of an employeeâ??s success they hold out hope that the person will turn it around. A leader may even blame themselves for the personâ??s lack of performance. They may think, *If I spend more time with the person, it wonâ??t have to happen.*
Sometimes, because performance conversations are hard, the leader may rationalize that talent is in short supply and if they let the person go, the area will be short-staffed. So they wait. Yet I have asked hundreds of employees, â??If you have the choice between being short-staffed or working with someone who is a performance problem, which will you choose?â?•â??and 100 percent of the time they say they prefer to be short-staffed.
Putting off what needs to be done only creates more problems in the long run. Not only does the job the person is responsible for not get done well, other employees notice. They may even have to pick up the slack for the poor performer. This creates resentment and, at times, can even cause higher performers to leave.
When discussing if itâ??s time to let someone go, the question I ask is this: *Who is working harder at the personâ??s success: you or them?* If the answer is you, then itâ??s time to say goodbye. You can carry a message; however, you cannot carry a person.
Here are some suggestions.

1. Ask yourself, *Does the person have the will to be successful? Are they giving it their all?* If the answer is yes, then it likely means while they have the will, they are not capable of attaining the skill needed to do the job. These are the toughest departures for leaders. Yet for the employee, if adequate training and feedback have been provided, being let go is often a relief. They know their performance is lacking. No one wants to go to work and know they are not performing well.
The more measurable performance goals are, the clearer this decision will be. This is true for people in leadership also. If customer satisfaction or sales or productivity metrics are not meeting the goal, the decision is easier to make.
2. Try not to own another personâ??s success. I had a manager come up to me one day to discuss a supervisor with low customer satisfaction results. They said to me, â??I will make this person a success if it is the last thing I do!â?• Donâ??t fall into this trap. At times an employee may even manipulate their leader into this co-dependent behavior. A good leader lays out that they want to be helpful, but the person is responsible for their own success.
3. Donâ??t frame someone elseâ??s issue as â??ourâ?• problem. A senior leader wrote me that she was having issues with a managerâ??s performance. She told me she essentially told the manager, â??This is our problem.â?• While the senior leader had good intentions, this sends a confusing message. I told her, â??No, it isnâ??t *your* problem to fix; it is the *managerâ??s* problem to fix. You canâ??t take on her problem as your problem.â?•
In a way, it is an â??ourâ?• problem. If the manager doesnâ??t stop the issue, it will become the senior leaderâ??s problem. However, right now it is up to the manager to fix the behavior. The senior leader needs to make it clear that itâ??s important for the manager to take ownership.
Being a leader is a tough job. While no leader wants to let someone go, at times it is necessary for the company. Often the person let go will realize it was not the best fit and will also be happier working for another company. Donâ??t delay making this decision. The quicker we do what needs to be done, the better off everyone will be in the long-term.

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