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# I Hated Firing People, Then I Learned It's About The People Who Stay

Top performers deserve more empathy than your poor performers



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Firing people is a painful process. It sucks, and it never gets easier for most of us. At the end of the day, you're sending fellow humans home to their families with no job. No matter who's at fault, it's depressing and sad.

I recall uncomfortable calls to HR expressing that I had to let someone go. I had to sift through emails and recant occurrences of poor performance. If

that wasn't stressful enough, I'd then spend time ensuring that I didn't do anything illegal.

I struggled with balancing my compassion for people with the proper way to fire someone. How could I show empathy, but also protect the company I work for? I never knew where to draw the line.

Before the meeting with an employee I had to let go, I'd walk around the block to get clarity. My stomach was queasy, and my neck was hot. Was I making the right decision? Was I a bad leader?

Even when the employee deserved it, I had a hard time. I learned that you can get used to the firing process, but you never get used to firing a human. It sucks and never feels good.

As dreadful as it may be, I learned a mental trick that helped me get through it all. By thinking about the people who still work for you, you recognize that "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

It sounds odd, but you let people go for the greater good.

## **It Starts With Empathy... For The People, You Don't Have To Fire**

There's nothing more harmful to your culture than letting poor performers stick around. They drag your 'A' players through the mud. Before you know it, negativity seeps in and takes over your company. Your top performers shift their focus to picking up the slack left by bottom performers. Task by task, your top performers get the life sucked out of them.

There's plenty of information about how to let people go, but what about those who are doing their jobs? These are the people who deserve the most empathy.

Showing genuine concern and investing in your 'A' players is magic. Empathy is your secret weapon. When you care, you'll fight for your people, and they'll fight to stick with you.

Earlier in my career, I thought this was a load of crap. I was gunning for success. I was bottom-line-focused, and I wanted to get the goal line as fast as possible. I pressed all the time.

One day while I was pushing my team to hit an unrealistic deadline, I

noticed one of my employees in tears. He had his head in his hands. I stopped by his desk, still looking at my watch, and I asked him what was up. It wasn't normal for him to be like this. For over an hour he explained his cousin was sick. I felt an overwhelming sense of humanity. I sent him home and pushed the deadline.

I kept tabs on him daily. While he visited his cousin, I happily took the heat from the business. He returned a new man and back to his 'A' player form. That day taught me a lesson: while I always cared I needed to show it.

After decades of management, you learn that spending time with people is the best tool you have. Demonstrating empathy when people make mistakes is what true leaders do.

Top highlight

Your employees must be able to screw up and know that they're safe. They must feel that you understand.

Even with the best management techniques, you'll have to let people go. You'll get that queasy feeling in your stomach. You will doubt your decisions. The human side of you will dread the conversation. You will not sleep the night before.

To make matters worse, we all fear litigation. It makes us all act weird when we have to let people go. What if the company gets sued?

I recall telling someone that I let go, that I knew they'd rebound because of how great he was. I tried to explain that this was a rough patch, and I was happy to recommend him.

My attempt at showing humanity backfired. He now felt that letting him go wasn't proper at all. Not only was he headed home with a box full of his things, but now he had to wrestle with thoughts of impropriety.

I learned that, indeed, one must be careful, but empathy still helps at this moment. You may not be able to say much, but people can feel empathy in your body language — even if you're silent.

## Make It Personal

Unless there's an unforeseen business event, you play a part in your people failing. The good news is once you understand your role, there's an easy fix.

I remember venting to a mentor of mine back in the day. I told him my horror stories. "These people are lazy," I'd say. I explained that the company had deadlines, and the employees didn't understand.

It perplexed me that employees didn't see the obvious objectives and rise to the occasion. My friend asked me, "what's their incentive to perform?" I told him it was their job.

He explained that it wasn't that simple. I needed to inspire and provide context. People need to have a connection and purpose. He challenged me to dig deep and reexamine my management weaknesses.

I learned that if employees weren't inspired, it was my fault. If their roles weren't well-defined, I was to blame for their poor performance. I needed to understand my role, man up, and fix it.

We all fall victim to arbitrary company objectives. The pressures of business encourage us to make wacky hard-nosed decisions. Politics cloud our vision, and our employees suffer. We focus on spreadsheets and made-up metrics rather than people.

I learned to make it personal. It's my job to make my employees better. And if I find myself in an HR meeting prepared to let someone go, it's partially them and largely me.

As leaders, it's our job to make our people successful. We must make the people around us better. It's our job to serve them and remove roadblocks. It pays to understand our role in their successes and failures.

## What Do The Studies Say?

20% of employees leave due to poor management.

Studies prove that you can't afford to keep low performers. True empathy is supporting your top performers. The least empathetic thing you can do is allow poor performers to drag hardworking people down. People who stay deserve your empathy, time, and investment.

A survey conducted by Eagle Hill points out that "low performers stifle innovation.

They say:

*The greatest benefit of replacing low performers is the new ideas and approaches that new hires would bring to the work.*

Somewhere in your organization, you have dedicated people making an impact. They are loyal to you, and they depend on you to make a decision. They want you to choose them. They don't want to be lost in the cluster f... created by bottom performers. Misplaced empathy hurts your good people.

Here's my list of empathetic activities every leader should take on:

- Fire poor performers.
- Correct bad attitudes or fire them too.
- Pour your heart and soul into those that work hard every day.
- Show empathy by being honest with your people. *Sometimes* poor performance is a matter of simple communication.
- Take responsibility because not every issue can be due to bad employees.

I hated firing people. I've actually vomited right before firing someone before. I dreaded it. I avoided this feeling by trying to keep poor performers around, spending way too much time focused on them.

We all hope that low performers can someday be great, but it often doesn't happen. If you think of empathy as a currency, spend it on hardworking dedicated people.

Listening to your people will teach you how to make them successful, and you won't have to fire people as often.