

## **From “Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader” by Linda A. Hill and Kent Lineback**

When an employee’s performance is obviously unacceptable and everyone knows it, including the person herself, it’s easier to take action, especially if the person has had every opportunity to improve. But some situations are not so easy. They will test you as a manager and your skills as a manager ...

When you’re dealing with poor employee performance and an employee whose job is in danger, consider these questions:

- **Do You Understand That Disciplining and Firing Are Multistep Processes That Need to Be Followed Systematically?**

Disciplining and firing [employee termination] should include not only what we suggest here but also the policies and practices of your organization. As soon as you realize an employee is a “poor performer,” let your boss know, and contact your organization’s HR department for guidance on how to manage an employee termination.

- **Do You Start by Trying to Understand the Reasons for Poor Performance? (It’s Not Always the Person)**

We tend to assume that responsibility for poor employee performance rests with the individual. Either they lack employee motivation or knowledge and skill. However, there are other possible reasons. The job may be poorly designed. Look at it and the work involved.

Some jobs are failure traps. Given the realities of the organization and the work, no one is likely to succeed in them. Or the job may be fine, but the fit between the job and the person is poor; it doesn’t use the strengths of the person, or it calls on him to perform activities he doesn’t like or value.

In these situations, consider modifying the job if appropriate -- “job sculpting” is becoming more common -- or moving an employee to a position that makes better use of his skills and interests.

### **Are You Careful Not to Set People Up for Failure?**

Have you been clear and forthright about the work and what you expect? Is there any chance you’ve confused the person, and he’s not sure what to do? Sometimes managers create situations that lead inevitably to an employee’s failure. You may have done this yourself. You conclude you don’t want this person in his job. It may be something about his work or demeanor.

Perhaps you inherited him from a previous manager, and you conclude, “He’s not one of us.” Having privately turned against him, you begin looking for evidence to justify the conclusion you’ve already reached. Even if you say nothing of this to the person, he can sense it in your actions, words, tone of voice, and general treatment.

Believing he’s been written off, he becomes discouraged and his work suffers. He avoids you, hides or ignores problems, and may even steer clear of team colleagues, who then turn against him too. He enters a vicious, downward spiral, at the bottom of which his performance justifies firing him, though it didn’t in the beginning.

Is this really a performance issue? Be aware of this downward spiral, aptly called the "set-up-to-fail syndrome," and recognize it early while there's still time to turn it into a straightforward, rational, and fair employee performance review process.

### **Do You Let People Know When They're in Trouble, and Help Them Improve?**

If someone's job is in jeopardy, and you've satisfied yourself the person is responsible, she has a right to know she's at risk, why, and what she can do to salvage her employee performance. She also has a right to whatever help you can provide. Her team colleagues will expect, first, that you deal with her performance -- a weak performer will drag down the whole group.

Second, they will want you to deal with her fairly and forthrightly. Don't play games by telling her she's in trouble only after you've concluded she must leave.

### **When People Must Go, Do You Help Them Leave with Dignity?**

Knowing how to terminate an employee is a serious matter, never to be taken lightly. Some managers, distraught that they must fire someone, justify their action to others and to themselves by demonizing the person. We once heard a senior manager describe someone he was thinking of firing as not only inept but without any merit, personal or professional.

We knew the person and understood why he had to leave, but we also knew the manager's description was extreme and unfair -- so unfair, in fact, it diminished the manager in others' eyes. It's important that you remain aware of your own feelings throughout your managing the employee termination process. Don't let your own sense of dissonance -- the conflict inside you between the "good" person you think you are and the necessity of doing such harm to someone -- push you to demonize the person.

Recognizing and managing your own feelings -- emotional maturity -- will help you treat the person with dignity through the difficult process of termination.

Treating any employee without respect, even when asking him to leave, is shameful and unnecessary. Unless she's being fired for cause -- dealing drugs in the parking lot or physically attacking a fellow employee, for example -- the details and explanation of his departure should be negotiated and handled as the painful but reasonable action it is.

Help him leave with whatever separation benefits you can provide and with words of support and encouragement. Obviously, you must observe at all times your organization's policies and procedures.

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