When Should You Fire a "Good Enough" Employee?

Managers and business owners alike understand this dilemma: Just when should you fire an employee who is just good enough?

The decision to terminate an employee is one of the most difficult challenges and decisions a supervisor or owner can make, yet it must be done if an employee is simply going through the motions and no longer performing to expectations or, worse, stopped self-improvement. You know the one — they'll tell you they have ten years' experience but, in truth, it is one year's experience repeated ten times.

How do you know when?

Firing someone you've worked with for years, especially someone you know, can be painful, even for the most experienced managers. It's almost impossible to take the emotion out of what is a very personal decision, even when it makes rational or economic sense.

So with all of these conflicted feelings, how do you know if your employee can be the "A" player they once were? And do you give them another chance? How will you know when enough is enough?

Say you have done everything by the book up until this point. You have given honest and constructive feedback. You have set realistic goals and objectives to be met, complete with timelines to follow. You have even asked your employee for input about how they can improve their performance, hoping for a personal commitment from them. From a human relations and management standpoint, you have done most everything in your power to set this employee up to win, to have a chance to contribute once again.

But what if, after all of this, nothing improves to a desirable level? Answer these three questions to quickly see what you need to do.

Is your employee meeting the responsibilities listed on their job description?

Although this is the baseline, many of us don't refer back to a job description after we've completed the hiring process. Neither do our employees. But by revisiting a job description well into an employee's tenure, a manager can now assess how aligned the employee is with it. This is where you can have a meaningful discussion about each part of the role and where the employee is falling short. It is a chance for the employee to re-calibrate their priorities or for you to revise the job description if necessary. If the employee's performance isn't matching with the current or revised job description, it may be time to terminate.

Good enough is never good enough. It's not fair to you, it's not fair to the employee, and it's not fair to your clients. Employees who aren't doing their job bring the team and the company down.

By allowing an underperforming employee to remain also undermines you as the employer. It says to the entire staff that a mediocre job performance is acceptable to you, and soon the performance of the entire team will slide to the lowest level. And why not? You allowed it to happen and even encouraged it by not taking action.

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Can the market offer you a better employee at the same price?

Many managers are trigger-shy because they haven't done any succession planning for this employee's role. How hard would it be to replace this person? How much time, energy, and resources would you need to invest to find someone with the needed skill, talent, and dedication?

The cost to replace talent is expensive — for an executive, anywhere from 20% to over 200% of their salary. Without a doubt, the hiring process is daunting, but with few exceptions, everyone is replaceable, as much as we'd like to think otherwise, and that includes ourselves.

Even a tenured employee with a solid history can become stale over time if not challenged. Some may have found themselves in a rut and unwilling to change or be motivated. The eventual replacement of this employee will bring a fresh pair of eyes, diverse thinking, and a powerful professional skillset.

In the end, the labour markets are full of efficient and talented employees looking to progress forward in their careers. Managers need to keep this in mind, even though it can be hard to see in the moment.

If the employee resigned today, would you fight to keep them?

By framing the question this way, you can honestly address your internal turmoil: How would you feel if they left you? Devastated? Then maybe the relationship is salvageable. Relieved? Then it's time to show your employee the door.

> *"Will you ask yourself why you waited so long?"*

In the end, you will find another employee who will exceed your expectations and make you question why you'd waited so long to act. And the terminated employee is now free to move on to another job with a better fit. While it may be incredibly difficult in the moment, it's often better off for everyone in the long run.

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