

From Roo to You



July, 2011

You're Fired – But I Still Like You

Last week hubby and I had the great pleasure of sharing happy hour with two colleagues. While sharing stories, triumphs and struggles, my good friend Sarah commented how interesting it was that I was having cocktails with one person I didn't hire and another person I helped terminate. I had never thought about it in that way before. When I did think about it, I realized I had coached another of my great friends at work, while another I also terminated. Do I make poor choices when recruiting candidates, am I a "corporate axe" or are there simply "right person, wrong fit" situations? Different people may have different opinions.

Whether you are going through a lay off, terminating for performance or simply acknowledging a "poor fit", transitioning an individually thoughtfully and respectfully will pay dividends. For me, it has led to lasting friendships with spirited, intelligent souls who put me in my place when I need it. For you, it may minimize the potential for legal action, maintain morale among remaining employees, and contribute to your corporate image as a great place to work – even when you have to fire people.

We hope this month's article will help facilitate smooth and amiable transitions in your business. As always, we welcome your input and feedback.

Five Star Off-boarding

Last month's newsletter focused on 5-star onboarding, so I found it fitting to use the same concept for transitioning people out of an organization. Below are five suggestions for creating a graceful off-boarding process.

1. Exit with dignity. When you see an HR staff member walking down the hall with a box, watch out! Everyone assumes the end is coming and watches closely. Whenever possible, let the employee choose how to exit, even for an involuntary termination. Does he prefer to just leave and have his personal things sent to him? Would he prefer to say his goodbyes to trusted colleagues? Let the person know what you will (and will not) be communicating to coworkers. The terminated person is not a criminal (in most cases!) Unless you anticipate extreme hostility or violence, let the person exit without an HR escort. It is a good idea to have a supervisor in the work area while the person is clearing out their desk and saying their goodbyes. If necessary, coax the person out of the work area after a few minutes by suggesting another time they can gather with colleagues.

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2. Trust but verify. Provide exiting employees with a copy of any employment agreements and remind them of their obligations regarding confidential information, non-competition, and return of company property. For an involuntary termination, it is wise to bring IT into the loop to terminate access to systems during the termination meeting. Be sure to ask the employee if there are personal documents they would like for their records (often people keep family photos, scout schedules, etc. on their hard drive). Ask if there are any paper-based or electronic company documents at the employee's home. Monitor CRM and ERP systems to make sure there is no unauthorized access.
3. Communicate carefully. Whether a person is exiting on good terms or not, it is important to be very intentional in all communications. Employers do not want to risk defamation or libel by stating opinions (Bob was just never the same after that back surgery – can you say disability discrimination claim?) or inaccurate facts. At the same time, saying nothing disrespects the intelligence and concerns of remaining staff. If the person is leaving on good terms, wish them well and name their new employer in an exit announcement. If the parting is not amiable, still recognize the person for their past contributions through a company or department announcement and use the vague yet telling “pursing new opportunities” line.
4. Gone but not forgotten. Some work environments are almost familial and coworkers share vacations, bowling leagues and barbeques. While some leaders worry what terminated employees might say off-site, employers do not need to start attending events just to make sure the person isn't speaking ill of the organization. Ending an employment relationship does not terminate friendships. If you have treated the individual graciously throughout the transition, little harm will come from their continued socialization.
5. Create the culture. Work diligently and consistently to create a high performance and values-based culture. If your culture consistently celebrates a certain value, while other behaviors are taboo, it is easier for remaining employees to understand why the collaborative sales person didn't fit in the independent and decisive culture. If your work environment emphasizes owning your mistakes and a coworker continually blames others, people will understand the separation without you having to say a thing. Further, if your performance management systems evaluate both work results (what) and values (how) the work is done, there will be a clear and consistent rationale for a termination. If your culture is nurturing, share what you can about assistance you are providing the exiting employee during a difficult transition (outplacement, recommendation letters, etc.).

While terminations are never enjoyable we can maintain respect, and in some cases retain the relationship.