

Successful Supervisor Part 41

Terminating People Well

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Occasionally supervisors are called upon to terminate an individual who is no longer being helpful to the group. There is no easy or pain-free way to fire a worker, but there are some mistakes that, if avoided, allow the supervisor, and others, to get through the difficult matter with grace.

There are a few different categories to consider, and the appropriate behaviors are very different depending on the situation. The easy termination is where an individual has threatened bodily harm to someone else and/or has a weapon capable of doing it. In these cases, it is always important to get Security or Police involved as early as possible. The termination needs to happen immediately without any chance of recovery. When a person goes to that extreme, he or she is an eminent danger to the population.

I recall one instance when I was a young Department Manager where an individual came into my office and made threatening gestures with a knife. He actually wanted to be terminated, and I granted his wish without any discussion.

That situation actually had a comical element to it. The termination happened when I was working for Kodak. I immediately engaged Security to escort the individual to his locker to clean out his personal effects, then accompany him to the other end of Kodak Park on a bus. He needed to go through the Senior HR Manager to get the paperwork signed prior to being released.

It turned out that the HR Manager was on his lunch break at the time and was sound asleep on the couch in the library. The guard woke up the HR Manager, who became angry and told the guard to take the individual back on the bus to the Department and return after his nap. That was a rather awkward situation for me, but we got through it. The point is that in extreme cases, you need to act with the appropriate urgency and not be worried about finishing your "nap!" There are times when people's lives are at stake, and you are responsible for their safety.

It is far more common to have to terminate an individual who has been pushing the limits for some time and is deep into the progressive counseling process. Normally the person is on "final warning" and is not particularly surprised to get the bad news. Even in those cases, it is a challenging period that requires firmness and poise on the part of the supervisor.

Avoid making a public spectacle of the firing. Usually the rest of the crew will be happy about the departure of a lagging workmate, but the individual doesn't need to witness the shop floor celebration on the way out the door. Most of the time, it is a wise idea to have Security or the Police involved in any termination, but there can be exceptions to this rule.

A category of termination that is pretty common is a layoff due to slack work. In this case, it was not the individual's fault directly, but the end result is the same: loss of employment. In these cases, showing deference to the impacted individual helps ease the pain just a bit for the person being let go, but more importantly, it shows the people who are to remain that management is not clueless to the plight of an impacted worker.

Some organizations have actually experimented with allowing impacted people to use the office as a staging platform for their next job search. In these cases, it is important to stipulate that the people affected not cause any trouble while they are physically present in their former employer's facilities. Such a policy is a signal of trust being extended to people who have performed well in the past and are impacted due to things out of their control. One of the best ways to build higher trust is to extend trust to others. In this case the trust built will be felt by the people who remain in addition to the people who are leaving. These cases are rare, but they do happen.

The vast majority of terminations involve a paper trail of progressive counseling and a sign off by higher management as well as HR. The key thing is to know the process for your area of responsibility very well and not deviate from it without express permission from HR. If you have not done the homework of providing documented counseling along the way, expect to get pushback from HR if you attempt to terminate an employee for cause.

Terminating people well is a sign of a mature and secure supervisor. There will be times when you need to perform this delicate chore, but doing it well is a sign of your worth to the organization. Next week I will deal with some tips for hiring people well. That process is a LOT more uplifting, but there are definitely some traps to avoid.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Successful Supervision." The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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