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How to Fire Gently

Why do we start this paper by using the phrase 'fire gently'? Because that is the way you MUST do it since the act of firing or releasing an employee is one of the greatest indignities that any human being faces in the modern world. Whatever the reason for the departure, the humiliation of the released employee is severe and can last a lifetime!

You may see on a resume that an individual has been 'promoted' or 'stepped up to a new company' but you will never see 'fired' even though it is a common-enough occurrence. That is because firing is viewed in our society with such indignity. There is a huge difference between a person quitting, or a person being fired even though the two acts are the same – the job is not working out. The only difference is who takes the step towards separation first and that seems to make all the difference in the world. It shouldn't but it does.

Armed with the idea of the 'pain' we will be inflicting by the act of firing or releasing an employee, this step has to be approached in a respectful way. Why? Because every human on this planet deserves as much respect as we can dole out – irrespective of how that human may, otherwise, have behaved¹.

Here then are the steps to firing or releasing the employee:

1. The direct supervisor of the employee should meet with the employee to advise the individual that their services will no longer be required as of such-and-such a date. This must be a clear, unequivocal statement. Let there be no doubt that this is the end for this individual at ABC Corporation.
2. Next, clearly lift the blame from the individual because not only are we trying to act respectfully, the blame no longer matters. More to the point, if you dare to blame you will get into a legal fracas called 'for-cause dismissal'. The deed of firing has already been enacted and that is enough. It is plenty! We evade the blaming by leaving the blame where it lies by using a statement such as "I do not know whether the problems lies with us or with you, or both of us, but it really doesn't matter. The time of our working together has not developed as I had hoped and so I will be making this change".
 - a. If the person is clueless as to why this is happening, and asks for an explanation do NOT provide it or justify the act of firing. Simply repeat that "In my opinion this relationship has not worked out and I wish to move on." END OF STORY.
 - b. If you think you are being noble by suggesting 'the problem lies with us at ABC corporation...', get a grip on yourself because you, the employer or supervisor have, also contributed to the problem. As much as you may not like to admit it, you either did not train the employee well enough, did not explain what was expected well enough, chose a person who could not meet your expectations, and, at the very least, made the wrong choice when hiring. Any of those errors are yours alone – not the employee's. Remember no employee sets out to be a bad employee; it is circumstances on the job that turn good intentions into an unacceptable work situation.

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¹ The principles of CCCC are based on behaving respectfully with all humans – even those you do not agree with.

3. Arrange a noble exit. This depends on your company policy. In many companies the fired individual is escorted out the door by an HR representative (not the supervisor) immediately after the firing meeting. Before that departure you can suggest many ideas to help the departing employee. These are discussed with the employee at that final meeting.

Did you read right? “Help the departing employee – after all that he has done to us????” Yes, you heard right. You have inflicted enough pain by the severity of the act of firing. Now it is time to help. You have a deeply wounded individual on your hands – a real live human being with feelings, concerns, family and so on – even if that may have been clouded by the events leading up to the firing. This is a very hurt individual. Offer any or all of the following:

- Offer to give an explanation about the departure to other company employees that suits the individual such as saying this person has chosen to move on (rather than being fired),
 - Help to find a new job such as paying for career coaching services² or if the person stays on the job for two more weeks, allowing the person to search on company time with help in the job search from a secretary and the supervisor,
 - Give a very decent, actually generous, severance package (which keeps you out of legal trouble),
 - Hold a party (paid for by the company) with his work buddies to celebrate his good times with the firm (even for an employee you might escort out the door),
 - Any other ideas you may have.
4. As with all departing employees, conduct your traditional exit interview – and listen!

Finally, what does all this bring you? We suggest three positives. Besides the altruistic idea of helping a wounded individual, first, as the supervisor doing the firing, you will feel much better about the action, whereas an unpleasant firing would stay with you for months, if not years. Second, the company will be seen as being helpful under very difficult circumstances. It is unlikely that the fired individual will bad-mouth you. Remember a bad experience is told to ten times as many people as a good one. You cannot afford negative press. Third, you will avoid a lot of legal nonsense.

Good luck in this difficult, unpleasant, but often necessary, task!

Bill
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² Personally, I recommend Career Coaching International (CCI) of Ottawa, a company I founded in 2004 and then sold in 2009 (and to which I no longer have any business attachment whatsoever). CCI operates the world over from its Ottawa base and has an amazing success record in finding the right job for difficult people. Go to www.ccinternational.ca