



When You Have to Say, 'You're Fired!'

By John Tschohl, July 2016



Firing someone can seem heartless, but in actuality, continuing to employ people who routinely fail is a disservice to them as well as your company.

Failure, especially consistent failure, breeds disappointment and resentment and rubs off on everyone else. Your team notices when you give a pass to someone else, and they'll start to question your ability to make decisions. In short, it's critical you remove the "bad apples" from your team before they infect everyone else.

Remember: You are responsible for your employees, and if they are failing, so will you.

If you're considering firing an employee, the first step is to give advanced warning. In some cases, it's necessary (perhaps because of company policies) and/or desirable to let someone know well in advance that the writing's on the wall and they'll be terminated if they don't make needed improvements, which you can then clearly outline in your meeting. (Keep in mind that advanced warning isn't always called for. If the employee's performance/behavior is especially offensive — sexual harassment, for instance, is grounds for immediate termination.)

You can set up an initial meeting to lie out the fact that things aren't looking good for them, and let them know the situation can be turned around with some measurable goals being met within a certain time frame, generally 30 to 90 days. This is traditionally called a "performance improvement plan." Once the "probation" period is up, if the employee still isn't up to snuff, they know what's coming, and are fired. This also gives the employee the chance to resign and exit gracefully within that time frame, should they choose to. When this type of performance plan is put in place, resignations are common.

If you've tried a PIP and things still aren't working out, it's time for the big conversation: you need to fire him or her. Firing an employee will be awkward and uncomfortable no matter what, but there are a few things you can keep in mind to make it a little less painful for everyone involved. You also want to protect your legal and financial interests, which can easily be forgotten in this process. Here are a few tips to guide you through the process:

Get to it swiftly. Act quickly once the decision is made, It's better for everyone involved.

Tell them the truth. This isn't a time for idle chitchat. Get right down to business.

Say they are "terminated." It's as simple as, "I have some bad news. Today is your last day here." Then state the reason for termination in one simple sentence. It seems cold and impersonal, but frankly, it needs to be.

Explain the details of leaving. Talk about any benefits they may have, ask they return any company property, especially keys/key cards.

Be prepared for anger. Be as understanding as possible. Studies that show that people who are told why it's necessary to let them go are less stressed about it.

Keep timing in mind. The end of the day, after a few employees have already left, is a good time for a termination discussion.

Don't take it personally. If you're having trouble mustering the courage to act, think about your team. After all, they're the ones who are picking up the slack because the person you need to fire is not doing his job correctly. Demonstrating respect and compassion are important for morale. How you treat people on their way out the door is noticed by the rest of your employees.

If you're a manager, firing people can be one of the most stressful parts of the job. But the termination of a marginal employee, if handled compassionately and maturely, will only generate relief from those who have had to put up with dead weight, slackers and jerks, without being able to take action.

Everyone has had a nightmare employee — who was yours? Comment with your horror stories.