

Should They Stay or Should They Go? What to Do with Poorly Performing Staff - By Jack Turesky and Nektaria Hamister - By Jack Turesky, The Hamister Group, Inc. with Nektaria Hamister

2007-04-17

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Fir' em is not always the right answer. Co-workers may be delivering inferior results because of personal problems, lack of training, unrealistic expectations, or failed attempts to innovate. In some cases the proper response to these issues can turn a hopeless employee into a corporate champion.

**Start by asking poor performers if they enjoy what they are doing.**

It's nearly impossible to be very good at something when you absolutely hate it. If co-workers with potential for success do not enjoy their present job, then think about whether they would be a fit for your organization in a different position or with modified duties. If this is not possible or if they simply don't like your business, then the most merciful thing you can do-both for the miserable co-worker and for your company-is to encourage the individual to move on to something more enjoyable. People who don't like what they do are destined for failure. Their self-esteem and work ethic will only deteriorate more if they continue in the same job. In the long run, you're doing them a favor.

**Find out if they feel confident in their job, or whether they need further training and support.**

We had an excellent Administrator who was promoted to Regional Director of Operations (RDO) after the acquisition of 6 nursing homes. Her performance deteriorated dramatically immediately after the promotion. We asked her what was going wrong and she responded that she was uncomfortable not knowing the systems of the new properties. She was so critical of herself that we realized we hadn't done a good job training her. So we refocused on training and she turned out to be a superstar RDO.

**Sometimes a little understanding of personal difficulties is a huge boost.**

The most tactful way to discover personal problems is by meeting in private with the individual, acknowledging the change, and asking, 'what's going on?' Several years ago the performance of another RDO dropped. We asked what was up and he informed us that his wife had cancer. He hadn't wanted to come to us with the problem, but was relieved to be asked. His performance started to improve as soon as he realized that we would give him space to work through his problems and he later told us that the company's understanding had helped him immensely.

**Of course, managers must always respect the right of an individual not to discuss personal issues.**

If they would like to do so, listen only, without offering opinions. Keep the discussion confidential and don't let it influence how you treat the individual in the future.

**Many cases of substandard results are due to unclear expectations.**

You can't arrive at a destination if you don't know where it is. Give co-workers the opportunity to define realistically high objectives for their positions. People will try much harder to meet their own goals than those that have been imposed upon them.

**If a drop in performance is caused by realistic innovation, companies need to be forgiving.**

You can't succeed in today's market unless you are different and dramatic; originality necessitates calculated risks. If co-workers fail or make mistakes in an intelligent attempt to innovate, they should be supported and not chastised.

**It is imperative that managers complete timely performance evaluations.**

This helps you to catch poor performance early and work through problems together. A bad report can always be purged after significant improvements. Evaluations also give you an opportunity to recognize and reward peak performers. High performers are the people who will most want to know how they can improve, so always have your suggestions ready and make your expectations clear.

**Never be too hasty to terminate a potentially good co-worker.**

We were very unhappy with the performance of an important co-worker, so we terminated her within a few months of her first warning. We later realized that this was a mistake: the cause of her poor performance was a soft market and our potentially unrealistic expectations. We had set the bar too high and acted too quickly. People's careers and self-respect are serious issues. If a co-worker's numbers are bad, but your gut tells you that the person has potential, then wait. Examine the situation from all aspects and terminate only as a last resort.

**2 + 2.**

After a few mistakes like the one above, The Hamister Group decided to implement a 2 + 2 policy: it takes two managers to hire and two managers to fire. Two managers must discuss and approve a termination. Negative incidents, such as an argument, should be followed by a cool-down period. The cool-down duration varies according to the situation, but it should ideally be at least one night.

**If you decided to terminate, proceed with caution.**

Review all of your policies and procedures in order to ensure that you won't have any legal problems after the termination. Acting emotionally can be expensive and time-consuming in the long run.

*Jack Turesky is President of The Hamister Group, Inc., a long-term care and hotel management company. Nektaria Hamister is Director of Public Relations. For more information or to sign up for the free monthly HG newsletter, visit [www.hamistergroup.com](http://www.hamistergroup.com). Comments and questions can be sent to [news@hamistergroup.com](mailto:news@hamistergroup.com)*

This article comes from Hotel News Resource

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