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You're the Principal ... Do Something!

Bill McCurry

(Editor's Note: This "guest column" was written by a regular reader who worked with Bill McCurry to share his story anonymously with others who might be suffering from the same self-imposed misery.)

My life mirrored the story about the small voice from under the bed: "The teachers hate me. The kids hate me. I don't want to go to school." The response, "You have to go to school. You're the principal!"

Burnout is hard to describe, but you feel it intensely. My wife knew something was wrong. She planned a 10-day driving trip to a cabin outside Yellowstone National Park with a view of the mountains. She'd coordinated with my general manager. The store would be well-staffed while I was gone.

As we drove and talked, my monumental frustrations diminished the further we got from the store. The second day in Montana, relaxing on our deck at sunset, I told her about a Bill McCurry seminar. Bill had said "As you're sitting here, your phone vibrates with a text from your manager back in the garden center: 'Someone just gave notice.'" Bill paused for a seeming eternity, then asked, "Who do you hope it is?" After the laughter—some uncomfortable—Bill made his point: "Everyone has people we need to take action about, but we don't know how to do it."

As we talked, my wife used the word "toxic" to define two of my longest-term employees. My term was "cancerous." We both knew a major cause of my burnout was avoiding any contact with them.

I said I couldn't terminate them after the 20+ years they'd each worked for me. She said they'd worked against me for that long. They know plants. They can diagnose numerous horticultural problems. But they can't keep a civil tongue when talking to me or other employees. They're consistently negative, dragging down everyone else.

My wife wouldn't let me off the hook. How would I feel about work if they weren't there? I'd feel joyful! Far away from the store, I made a decision. From Montana I called our attorney and discussed options. Fortunately, we're in a right-to-work state. I could terminate them at will. Since we had other senior employees, we weren't terminating because of age.

The attorney asked me about unemployment insurance. If they filed for unemployment, they'd likely get it and my account would be charged. It would be a cheap price to pay to restore my sanity and my passion for the business.

We talked about severance. Nothing is mandated in our state. The attorney warned there are no guarantees against lawsuits. He suggested offering one week's severance for every year of service, which meant almost a full year's salary split between the two of them. I could tie this severance to signing a non-disclosure agreement and full release of liabilities. They would agree not to talk about their termination and never to sue us. It sounded good! My attorney drew up the paperwork. To ease the cash flow and keep the former employees intellectually committed to

the non-disclosure, we would pay it out weekly over almost six full months.

Firing would be difficult, but I was thrilled with the idea of them no longer depressing me and the team. The attorney said to make the terminations quick. I told each of them, "I think it's best for us to go our separate ways. I appreciate all you've done for me and for the company. In respect for our relationship, here's a \$xx,xxx severance package that includes our mutual agreement not to discuss the terms of your departure, as well as a mutual release of all liabilities. Here's your paycheck through end of business today, including your accrued vacation pay. If you find these documents agreeable, return them signed. One week after they're returned, we'll start sending your weekly check."

Neither termination session was easy. Neither employee took it well, consistent with their job behavior. The staff was shell-shocked and a few were almost antagonistic that day.

The following week I called an all-hands meeting. There'd been complaints about the increased work load with the "shortage of people." When I started our meeting, one employee, who'd seemed antagonistic to my terminations decision, volunteered he'd spoken too soon. He noticed a lighter, more fun ambiance now. Consistent with our non-disclosure agreement, I didn't comment, except to say I recognized adjustment was needed and asking them to consider what the company should do.

"Consider this: Should we replace these two positions—or should we take those payroll dollars and give everyone in this room \$5/hour more? This will require four hours/week overtime in our moderate season and up to 20 hours/week in peak season. Overtime would be time-and-a-half at the \$5-higher-per-hour rate."

Their reaction told me most were ready to sign on instantly. "Consider it over the weekend and we'll meet again on Tuesday." We needed everyone's total agreement to commit to more overtime.

Tuesday rolled around and everyone agreed to more money, more overtime. Additionally, two employees reached out to former employees asking if they'd return for peak season work. Three great employees agreed to come back. One even said if the "troublemakers" were gone, she might consider full-time.

Now I'm excited about my business again. It's a different world—more smiles, less hassle. I thought readers who're suffering from a similar situation might appreciate my story. **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169.