

Front Lines

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Too Poor to Keep ... Too Good to Fire

Bill McCurry



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He's a faithful reader who calls me occasionally. Today he wailed, "After 20 years of experience, 'X' is less effective than he was 10 years ago. The other employees see he isn't carrying his weight, while they're held to a higher accountability."

I said, "It sounds like he's had one year's experience 20 times over, not 20 years of experience."

My caller's silence told me I was correct. I continued, "Does 'X' have the skill set to do what you want? Does he know your goals?" The caller didn't understand, so I explained. "If it's a skill problem, it's like teaching a pig to sing—it wastes your time and annoys the pig. Obviously, employees aren't pigs, but the concept fits. Is 'X' able to understand and accomplish what you need done?"

"Yes," my caller said, "He's done it before, but he's lost interest. After all these years, I hate to fire him."

Let's get it clear—employees should fire themselves. It's their decision to do or not do what you ask. You aren't responsible for their decisions; you can only respond to the employee's actions. Give your employees all reasonable support and tools. They decide either to be part of the solution or part of the problem.

In this situation, call your attorney so you understand local laws. You'll likely have to pay unemployment insurance if you dismiss this employee—a cheap way out of a bad situation. You need to change the situation.

Ask your attorney about having a conversation like this with the employee. "We've loved working with you and hope you can rededicate yourself to being a superb team member. With the shape retail is in, we can survive only if everyone produces at full capacity."

Now outline what hasn't been accomplished, without making the conversation accusatory. Your issue is with the employee's actions or lack of them. In other words, don't focus on the person, but on the person's behavior.

Use a factual statement like, "We weren't ready for a professional store opening this morning because the spilled peat moss hadn't been cleaned up." That's an inarguable statement of fact—either the peat moss was cleaned up or it wasn't.

Avoid saying "you," which sounds like a personal attack. "You didn't clean up the peat moss" may be just as

accurate, but instead focus on the mess, not the employee. It's hard to have a candid discussion with someone who's constantly defending themselves.

Look directly at the employee and say, "This situation is very serious. If we can't agree on increased efficiency and productivity, your employment will end. I don't want that, so right now can we identify what concrete changes you'll agree to?"

Then calmly identify where the weaknesses are that must be changed, by when and how. Write this down with the employee. Whenever possible, use the employee's own words to describe the necessary changes. Once those issues are resolved, ask, "Can you write down our goals? What additional training or tools can I give you so you'll achieve them?"

When all problems are on the table, say, "We'll monitor these things together. This is serious. If these goals aren't met, I'll take it as your decision not to work here any longer. Please come see me whenever you need something before that happens. I'm cheering for your success."

You can't cure this problem until you've reached the psychological point of accepting you may have to terminate the underperforming person, no matter how long their tenure. If you aren't ready to end the relationship, you aren't ready to fix the problem. Not fixing it gives permission for substandard performance to creep through your entire organization. **GP**

[Here's a worksheet](#) showing how to discuss difficult topics with employees who aren't performing to your standard. It's free to *Green Profit* and *GrowerTalks* readers!

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.