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## Hire Employees, Don't Adopt Them

Bill McCurry



"I'm not taking a long lunch. They fired the founder's granddaughter yesterday. Finally, they may be getting serious about running this place as a real business. I want to keep this job."

The owner heard this comment while walking by the lunch room. The day before, at an acrimonious meeting, a third-generation family member who consistently came in late and left early was terminated. The strain her erratic attendance and lack of professionalism put on her coworkers, including other family members, was too much. The owner realized she

had set the standard for what would be tolerated.

Close your eyes and pretend you're at a conference. You receive a garbled voicemail saying a staffer had quit, but you couldn't hear the name. Who do you hope it was? If someone's name comes to mind, why are you waiting? You have a situation that needs resolution. You must either correct below-standard behavior or manage the terminations.

When an employee isn't meeting expectations there are four likely causes:

1. The employee isn't capable, they're a bad hire or their skill set doesn't match the job.

Solution: Separation or reassignment is usually the only solution. To not repeat the same mistake, you must do a complete debrief on how the bad hire got through the system.

2. The employee doesn't know what to do and/or how to do it.

Solution: Education is required with completion target dates and follow-up.

3. The employee doesn't have the tools, equipment and/or supplies to do the work.

Solution: Provide the needed tools.

4. The employee lacks the desire to regularly perform to your standards.

Solution: Management must take corrective action.

Hearing a manager say, "I've told them a hundred times what to do and they aren't doing it," isn't an employee problem. It's a management problem. Management that only talks/threatens is both toothless and ineffective.

Seawright & Associates, a human resources management consulting firm, provides professional HR consultation to

garden centers and others needing help mitigating inherent employment risks. Owner Jean Seawright feels garden center owners are often “guilty of being too good.” They want to give people multiple chances. They’re naturally non-assertive and gentle-spirited, hesitant to confront conflict.

If you threaten someone with termination by saying the person WILL BE terminated if the action happens again, follow through or lose credibility. You’ll also raise a question as to whether the conduct was, in fact, bad enough to warrant termination. You’ll lose all credibility with both the employee and the rest of your staff, causing the best people to doubt the team’s leadership. They’ll question if they’re in the right place for a long-term career.

Today, with pandemic concerns keeping everyone uptight, just one toxic employee can poison the workplace, increasing the strain on good workers. Bosses/owners must deal with the effect of bad attitudes on the team, their business culture and their morale.

### **Having “That” Talk**

Use language that gives you some flexibility. Jean’s firm provides guidance on which words to use or not use. Rather than being defensive, they encourage upper management to have an open mind in every situation, holding judgment and listening objectively.

It’s harder than it sounds.

Jean suggests a discussion with a “bad attitude” person could start with, “I have a problem and I need your help solving it. Mean-spirited behaviors felt by me and coworkers drag us all down.” Jean’s wording focuses on the problem as something that lies between the boss and the employee. Don’t open the conversation with an accusatory tone. The employee isn’t accused of anything specific yet. Jean’s approach conveys how the boss and others are impacted by the employee’s words and actions. It’s only a report of how the situation affects others.

Jean advises, “You can’t change employee problems without the person agreeing there’s a problem. When something is going wrong, you should provide specific examples. In a small company, it’s hard to do this without divulging coworkers’ names. The employee must understand the severity of the situation and understand it calls for immediate corrective action. Specific facts make it hard for an employee to disagree with you. That’s the key—to gain agreement there’s a problem that must be fixed. The employee who doesn’t agree or understand there’s a problem is less likely to correct it.”

### **Firm, But Fair**

Jean believes “being fair” also means “being tough.” Everyone makes mistakes and must be held accountable. Ignoring bad behavior may seem “kind,” but won’t help anyone long-term. Tolerated behavior becomes the new low standard, sending an incorrect signal to the other employees. Low standards are problematic should you ever need to discipline another employee for the same behavior.

Your company may need a “reset.” Jean emphasizes, “It’s a new day and we must enforce the rules we may have let slide over the years. Hire employees. Don’t adopt them. Hold people accountable for the results of their actions on a fair and equitable basis for the entire team.”

“Jean helped us write our handbook, and is like a psychologist and HR expert all in one,” says Bruce Davidson (Abide A While Garden Boutique in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina). “When I was pulling my hair out over an employee issue, Jean was a joy to speak with and very helpful with her advice, support and encouragement.

“She helped us get started using objective personality tests with prospective employees. It’s made our hiring much more effective.

“Robert Hendrickson, founder of The Garden Center Group, told me early on, ‘Hire people who supplant your

weaknesses.' Now we've got a great team—people who focus on what needs to be done, even if it includes unpleasant employee conversations. The objective personality tests help us to more effectively explain our standards and find people with the same value set."

Bruce sums it up well: "We're still a family business with an energetic team, which feels like family. We care for each other. We're also doing our best to make our standards known and to enforce them immediately, fairly and consistently."

That's a lesson for us all. **GP**