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Managing People

Letting Good People Go When It's Time

by Pat Wadors

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Let's say you're a manager in a company that's scaling up or gearing up for some other kind of transformation. Your biggest job right now is to lead your team through it all and help everyone adapt. You soon realize that some people are well-suited to the changes that must be made, but some aren't — and you'll have to let several good employees go.

Sound familiar? It's happened to me — many times. This is especially common in high tech, where the market is constantly evolving. But really, all companies need different kinds of talent at different points in their life cycles. In order to grow, they may have to part ways with collegial, talented employees who just aren't the right fit anymore.

Like frogs in hot water, people often don't know how much they are struggling until it's too late. But as their manager, here's how you can help ease their transition out of your organization and into something new.

Don't wait until the end to say what's been working and what hasn't. Give everyone on your team honest feedback along the way — and get feedback about people from key partners inside the company to calibrate your thinking. When you have criticism, start by thanking people for their work and contributions, and highlighting what you *do* like. That makes it easier for them to absorb what you're saying and to ask probing questions when you point to areas for further development. And ask *them* questions: Do they see the gaps that you see? What are they experiencing? Get them discussing stretch areas in a constructive way, so they won't just shut down. You can give tough messages while being respectful and compassionate. At the end, thank them again for their hard work. Hearing that they have real gaps, and that you see them, will be difficult enough. You don't want them to walk away demoralized while there's still a chance to help them adapt.

If employees continue to struggle, ask them how they feel about their progress. If you set the right tone, folks will open up and express their fears and frustrations. No one wants to fail. Seek to understand how people have evolved in their roles and what gets them motivated. It may be that you haven't tapped their full potential yet because you haven't provided the right kind of support or meaningful incentives.

Offset your positional power by going for walks with employees instead of having formal sit-down meetings, or try finding a location with more balanced seating than your office. You want to figure out if they see themselves clearly and get them to share what motivates them. Show you care. Be authentic. They will sense that and relax.

Once you've decided that some people aren't the right fit for the long term, tell them. That doesn't mean you fire them on the spot, but give people as much time as you can to sort out where they are headed next. If there's a specific performance issue, many companies use a 60- or 90-day performance improvement plan that outlines what success looks like, how the manager can assist the employee, and what milestones must be hit. (But this should be reserved for problems that can actually be solved in two or three months. And it should come *after* you've had many conversations about development, so no one is in the position of having to acquire brand-new skills with very little warning.) If the employee is successful on the plan, she remains employed. If not, it's time to part ways.

Keep this conversation as constructive as possible, and help people focus on the future. Talk about what works for *them.* What are their strengths? Where do they get their joy? Help them be more self-aware while not crushing their confidence. It's not the time to point out every flaw. You are preparing them for their next play.

Encourage them look outside themselves, too — they'll need to scan the horizon for their next gig. What stage companies should they explore? In what kinds of organizations are they likely to do their best work? Where will they be happiest? Ask these sorts of questions as prompts, and provide guidance where you can. Remember, they are leaving your company with a foundation of skills and successes. They just weren't a fit for the stage the company is in and where it's going.

Allow them to exit with grace. Partner with HR to learn best practices. In most cases the employee still adds value, so it benefits both the person and the company to offer a few weeks of transition time at the end. Severance packages extend that grace period, of

course — they're pretty common protocol. When doing several job reductions, organizations often provide outplacement services as well to get people engaged with their new job search. Anything you can do to help them land on their feet will further increase the team's trust in you as a leader and enhance the company's overall talent brand.

Don't forget the survivors. When explaining layoffs or the termination of a peer to the team members who are staying on, be clear about what's happened. Sending mixed signals will make the rest of the team jumpy — and it's essential to maintain their trust, especially in a time of transition. For instance, if you know that you'll be appointing an interim leader or that you may have to make future cuts, say so. Don't promise a future of stability if you can't deliver it. Be honest. Also spell out what success looks like going forward so people don't have to guess. If the ability to scale is key, what does that look like for your team?

It's never easy to let an employee go. However, once you have made your decision, your goal is to treat employees beautifully — those who are leaving and those who are staying. It's best for them, and it's best for the company.

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