

**Title:**

Firing Someone - Does it have to be painful, for them and you?

**Word Count:**

1267

**Summary:**

Ever had to fire someone? How did it go? Chances are, that if you are a manager you will have to fire someone during your career. Bob Selden sets out some points that will help you through the process whilst maintaining the self esteem of the employee.

**Keywords:**

Motivated employees, firing, hiring and firing, managing people, management training, leadership, management, employee feedback

**Article Body:**

Copyright 2006 The National Learning Institute

The need to write this article came about through the recent experience of two of my friends. Both had been fired. One for supposed poor performance (although she had never been counselled and at the time was in fact on sick leave) and one because the start up facility she was employed by, suddenly closed down. Both were senior managers. Both were loyal, hardworking employees but are now very angry and taking legal action against their former employers. Why are they so angry? One could say it's because they have lost their jobs and this would be quite understandable. However, the main action that has triggered their anger and catapulted them down the legal pathway (in both cases), was that they were informed of their dismissals by emails. Yes, that's right by email! They were never given the courtesy of a face to face discussion.

Many managers, when faced with the challenge of firing someone, forget, or are unaware of the emotions that are experienced by the person being fired. Nor are they aware of the behaviour that most often results from these emotions. It has been well documented that the death of a loved one, a marriage or long term relationship breakup and the loss of one's job, have an equal and similar impact on one's emotions. Think for a moment about the loss of one of your dear relatives or friends through death - how did you feel? That's exactly the same feeling that people have when they suddenly and unexpectedly lose their jobs.

The psychologists tell us that there are 5 stages that people go through in this

"grief cycle" - Shock, Resistance (often manifested as anger), Acceptance (of the current situation), Exploration (of new opportunities), Commitment (to a new future). Can any of these emotions be managed via email?

I can well recall the first time as a manager I had to fire someone. It was for poor performance and I was scared. I did not sleep the night before wondering what I would say and what would be her reaction. I carried out the interview in the morning with great fear and trepidation. I was not sure how the interview went, but was relieved when it was over and then took a break for lunch, but was unable to eat. I did not know about the "5 stages" at the time, I only knew that I had to do the right thing by the organisation and by the employee. I arrived back from my break to find a box of chocolates on my desk with a very nice note from the employee saying how much she appreciated my courtesy and kindness. I guess, intuitively I must have got something right.

Now, from years of experience, I know two things about firing someone:

1. Firstly, the person at all times must maintain his or her self esteem. This is one of the most basic and important needs that all people have (emailing someone, or even worse as I heard since starting this article, texting, sends a clear message that they are not worthy of a face to face discussion)
2. Secondly, it is vitally important to realise that all people will go through the five stages of the grief cycle (quite often at different paces) and as a manager, it is our role and responsibility to help them progress through these stages, particularly the first two that are likely to occur when they are still with us.

How do you do this? Well, in my usual style when writing an article such as this, I did my web research. Sad to say there was not much there. Under "firing someone" there seemed to be a plethora of articles about the legal requirements and many about the steps to take. For example, one article suggested the following steps: Give warning, Document, Document, Document! Time it right, Prepare the paperwork, Don't go it alone (ensure you have someone from HR there), Ensure privacy, Be brief, Watch your tone, Seek feedback, Give a good send-off. Few of these steps would address the 5 stages of grief. Many could probably be done by email with the same impact and result! If these steps were followed, I wonder what "feedback" the manager would receive - would there in fact be a "Good send-off"?

I'm not suggesting that we don't have to address some of these. For example, you must cover all of the documentary and legal responsibilities pertinent to your country and organisation's requirements. But keep in mind that the fired

employee is first and foremost a person just like you with feelings and emotions that must be managed.

Here are some suggestions (assuming of course that you have fulfilled all the other requirements) for the next time that you have to fire someone:

- Before taking any action, ask yourself: "How would I feel if my boss came to me today and said - you're fired!" Write down a list of words that describe your feelings.
- If you were in the situation of being fired, how would you like your boss to handle it? What would you like him/her to do and to say? Jot down some of your thoughts.
- Now write down a list of the words that best describe your feelings about having to fire someone. Review all the words you have scribbled down so far and pick out the two or three strongest. Also keep in mind how you would like to be handled in similar circumstances.
- Script the start of the conversation using the two or three words you have discovered. e.g. "This is really difficult for me. I feel apprehensive and worried that I won't get it right."
- The next part of your opening script will depend on the circumstances. For example in a "lay off" situation, it might go something like; "I have been advised that I have to terminate the employment of a number of people. I am really sad to say that your name is on that list". Or, for a non performance issue, it could be something like; "We have discussed my expectations about your performance and unfortunately they are still not being met. It now really saddens me (or whatever your feelings are) that I will have to terminate your employment".
- Be careful. You can only script the opening few lines, but they are important because they set the scene for the entire interview.
- It is most likely that during the remainder of the interview, the employee will travel backward and forwards between "shock" and "resistance". Give your reasons for the termination clearly and succinctly, but do not get into a discussion about justifying yours (or your employer's) reasons. Doing so will keep the employee fixed in either of the first two stages and will not help them to progress. Only sincere listening and clear questioning (not reasoning) will help the employee progress to the acceptance stage.

One factor that is often overlooked when firing someone, is that the way it is

done can have as much impact (positive or negative) on the people who remain. They will be watching (and will invariably get a first hand report from their colleague) about how well or otherwise the process was managed. The people who remain in the organisation, and whom I assume you want to keep, get a good look at both the manager's and the organisation's real people management skills when under the stress of firing someone. They'll most certainly ask "Could this happen to me?"