

If You Don't Pull the Weeds, They'll Take over the Garden

This article is about firing employees in small business. For many of us, it's one of the hardest things to do.

Many small businesses have many of the characteristics of families, and so firing an employee can feel like expelling a family member.

After all, that employee may have been with you for years, and can remember when things weren't so good. And that employee may have made major contributions to whatever growth and success you may have enjoyed.

Loyalty is a factor, too. You may feel an extreme loyalty to your vendors, suppliers, and employees, and you may feel some expectation of loyalty in return.

How, then, can you, a responsible and caring business owner, undertake such a disloyal act to one of your business family?

THE CAPTAIN OF THE SHIP

Simply put, a ship can only have one captain. And if you own the business, you **must** be that captain. It's your financial and personal risk, and it's your business and personal reputation that are at stake, after all.

If you let someone else be the Captain, you jeopardize the well-being of your other employees, your customers, your business, and ultimately, your family.

Small businesses are all about people performing well-defined and well-accepted roles. I'm not talking about job descriptions, because small businesses can change too fast for job descriptions to keep pace.

Rather, small businesses are continually adapting to change, and thus the employees and the roles played by the employees must change as well.

The concept of fit applies, as well. The employee must "fit" the role, or the set of job functions, and vice versa. Situations without a high degree of job fit usually result in unhappy situations and poor job performance.

That unhappiness and poor job performance is very quickly noticed by the other employees, and often by customers. People begin to wonder what is going on, why the owner tolerates this negative behavior, and who really is in charge.

They begin to wonder, "Who, really, is Captain of our ship?"

THE WEEDS TAKE OVER

Your other employees begin to measure their performance against that of the offending individual. They begin to wonder why they are not rewarded for what they consider to be superior

performance, and why substandard behaviors are tolerated.

In essence, they are beginning to question the integrity of the Captain. The other employees really are not all that interested in the "whys" of what's going on. They just want it stopped, so they can look forward to coming to work in a pleasant environment where people are rewarded where they do well or suffer when they don't perform properly.

IF THE CAPTAIN DOESN'T ACT...

Failure to act appropriately and in a timely manner will cause the other employees to confront the offending individual, or possibly the owner.

If that doesn't work, the "good" employees will often display some inappropriate behaviors of their own. After all, if s/he can get away with it, why shouldn't I?

If the Captain still doesn't act, the "good" employees invariably begin to leave. Ultimately, the business is left only with the substandard performers. The "good" ones are all working elsewhere, and possibly for the competition. The weeds take over the garden...

IF THE CAPTAIN DOES ACT...

My experience in companies large and small has invariably been the same. People come out of the woodwork—people you didn't even know were upset—and they all say the same thing.

They say, "What took you so long? We were beginning to wonder whether you cared about any of us. And while we like it here, we were starting to think we'd have to leave, because we don't want to put up with this."

Something else happens, too. Productivity invariably goes up. The remaining employees are so happy and relieved and positive in their approach that good things just seem to happen.

PAST AND PRESENT

Sometimes these situations arise because the Owner has a past focus where an individual is concerned. After all, that owner is responsible and loyal and all that.

But we all must live in the present, and an Owner must weigh past obligations against present requirements. Recognizing past loyalty and service is important, but must be subordinate to current needs of the business, its employees and customers.

An Owner who fails to recognize this fact arms an unhappy employee with a control tool that works to no one's benefit.

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