

How to Terminate an Employee

Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

Managers universally hate firing an employee. It takes them awhile to come to the firing conclusion; they dread the actual meeting; they don't sleep the night before. It's important for a manager to do this carefully, for the sake of the person being escorted out the door as well as the company, in the event the terminated employee takes legal action. You can't prevent that, but if you do this right, the company won't lose.

The degree of difficulty in doing this is determined by the work you do before the termination. If you've done your job of identifying performance problems when they happen, followed up with meetings and performance appraisals, then three-quarters of the work is done. Have you done performance reviews? Have you written a memo to the employee indicating performance problems? Have you told the employee what improvement is needed? If you have, the termination meeting is largely confirmation of what's gone before. If you've done nothing, then your work has just begun.

Every termination is unique. How you proceed will be determined by the level of the employee, your pre-work, company requirements, the stability of the employee; the key to success is being organized.

1. *Document, document, document.* Back up your decision with the evidence of the non-performance that brought you to it.
2. *Who needs to know?* Human Resources? Anyone on the Board? Other key employees? Do you need the advice of an attorney? Go into this with the counsel of another, even if you have complete right to fire someone. You'll get an improved perspective.
3. *Write down the steps you will take.* It will help you calmly carry out your strategy in a typically emotionally charged setting. What steps will YOU take? Others? What's the fair thing to do? Will you provide severance? Additional benefits? How will the person leave the building? What will you do afterwards?
4. *Be mindful of protected employee groups.* Talk to an employment attorney to be sure you're proceeding correctly.
5. *Have a Plan B.* What could go wrong? Can the person resign? Do you need a separation agreement? Will you provide a later reference letter?
6. *Follow your policies.* If you don't have them, behave consistently when you fire anyone. If a union contract or termination policy dictates a probationary period, do that first. Unless there's a good reason to fire someone on the spot, terminations take awhile to organize and implement.

7. *Consider the impact on the organization.* Employers worry about this, but often the employee has used up political capital in the company, so co-workers will be relieved to see the person go. Who will be affected? How will you deal with their reactions? What do you intend to say? (Do not EVER discuss details of personnel issues with other employees.)

8. *Assess the need for others' involvement.* Do you feel physically safe? Is the person erratic? Do you need Security nearby?

9. *Have at the meeting the documents and information you need.* Have the paycheck, unpaid vacation, information about ongoing benefits, any agreement. Know what you need to get: employee ID pass, IT access, etc.

10. *Do the firing on Thursday afternoon at 4:30.* The day is winding down. This may go past 5:00, which will save face for the exiting employee. You can inform the organization the next day. The buzz will be over by Monday, in almost all cases.

11. *You may want someone in the meeting with you, but you do the talking.* You're the boss. It's what you're paid for. Human Resources is generally the witness in this type of meeting, brought in when you've given the reason for the meeting and the non-performance specifics. HR can help work out the details.

12. *Get to the point and be specific.* Here is why we're meeting today. I've given this a lot of thought. I think it's best for you and the organization that we part company today, based on these reasons (and give the specifics of non-performance).

13. *Expect pushback.* You've just squashed someone's world. Some give you a baleful look and storm out; some are stunned, some weep; some beg for their jobs back.

14. *Have a heart.* You want this to be over. The employee is devastated. Let the person talk, rant, cry, ask you to reconsider. Stay firm in your decision, but hear the person out. When the reasons repeat themselves, steer the discussion to its end. Will your door be open to later conversations?

15. *Know how the person will leave the premises.* You just perpetrated the act; you may not be the best "accompanier." Another employee? Will everything be cleared out today or can the person come back to collect belongings? (Some companies allow this gentler leave-taking.)

16. *Remember how you felt.* Most of us get fired at least once in our career. Remember what that was like for you. Let it guide you as you put another person on this path. You're doing the right thing for you and the company. Don't let your own discomfort make you a beast.

Firing someone is an unpleasant experience, but nine times out of ten, the employee was not in the right job — whatever the reason, was not giving value for the salary paid - and this is the best move for all parties.

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