

*This is the 6<sup>th</sup> article of 6 in the Managing Performance Toolkit.  
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Most leaders find firing staff to be one of the greatest challenges of leadership. We don't want to hurt people. There are understandable concerns about taking away someone's livelihood. We worry about the impact on other staff and morale. Many leaders are uncomfortable with conflict and tend to put off or avoid dealing with problem performers. We may try to convince ourselves that they're really not so bad or hope that the person will choose to leave on their own and save us from having to fire them.

Firing is one of our most important leadership acts. Many social change organizations are far too tolerant of poor performance. We have precious few resources to meet the scope and scale of the challenges we face in achieving our missions. We sometimes fall into thinking of our staff as family. This is a mistake. We can and should care about each other as people and be good to each other, but our purpose in coming together in an organization is to serve a higher mission. As social change leaders, we need to be willing to hold standards of performance commensurate with the importance of our task. Sometimes that requires us to step up and remove people that fail to make sufficient contributions to the team's functioning and well-being.

### **It's not personal**

You are acting as a servant of the mission, of the people that look to you for leadership. Firing is a positive act. Think of your organization as a symphony orchestra. There's someone in the ensemble who's playing out of tune, off the beat, or on the wrong page. A person may not be pulling their weight, or even worse, pulling in a different direction. They drain rather than give energy. If this continues – after reasonable efforts to support, to coach and to train – then it becomes a real gift to the organization and its mission to remove the player from the orchestra. The move creates an important opportunity for a new hire that can help raise the performance of the whole team.

The quality of your people is one the greatest assets you have to help fulfill your mission. Our colleagues at the Management Center suggest the following: Don't focus on whether or not a person is so bad that you should fire them. Rather, ask yourself, *"Are they sufficiently contributing to furthering the mission of our organization that I want to keep them?"*

Depending on the circumstances and the people involved, firing may or may not prove to be a painful or traumatic event. When a person is aware that they are failing to perform, it's usually not a very positive situation for them either. But people may disagree with our assessment and be very resistant to termination. We may have to deal with someone being upset or angry. You want to prepare yourself well for the meeting. You may have your own emotional reactions to the situation – regret, frustration, sadness, anxiety. Deal with these beforehand so that you show up with clarity, professionalism and compassion.

## **Be tough on performance but kind to people**

Let people know why you're firing them. But, we also want to care for people and do what we can to protect their self-esteem.

Termination may sometimes be a result of low motivation and effort or bad behavior. However, when someone fails at a job, some of the responsibility may also lie with you and the organization. You may not have put the right person in the right role or failed to provide sufficient training or support. Every person is capable of a wide range of possible contribution. A lot has to do with circumstances, the match between a person's abilities and the requirements of the role. Things like values, styles, energy levels, and interpersonal chemistry all impact a person's ability to jell with a team. Also, some firings are due to organizational changes that lessen the need for an individual's particular skills.

It is your responsibility to make a judgment on the person's suitability for a given role. But, you can communicate this in ways that do not judge their worth as a person. It's always best to describe the situation in terms of the person's skills not fitting the requirements of the role rather than focusing on some general shortcoming of the person being fired. Without shying away from the reasons for the firing, we can also usually find ways to appreciate the person's positive contributions.

The termination interview is a time to listen deeply to whatever the person may need to communicate. Don't debate with the person. You have the power in the situation. They have their point of view, which may well differ from yours. Allow them the right to their perspective.

Remember that you are dealing with a human being, worthy of respect and compassion, whatever the reasons for their termination. When we're dealing with an uncomfortable situation, we may tend to close out hearts, to become awkward or more formal. It is possible to communicate your caring for another human being even as your role requires that you fire them.

There are numbers of other considerations around firing, such as HR and legal needs, documentation, timing, communications and handling the termination with the rest of the staff. For additional help with the practicalities of the firing process, see the excellent chapter on "Performance Problems and Letting People Go" in *Managing to Change the World*, published by The Management Center.