

Firing People in a God-honoring Way!

By John Pearson

I've never met a manager who slept well the night before firing an employee. Terminating a team member is gut-wrenching. It consumes hours of planning, implementation and follow-through—and then you're back to square one with an empty chair, doing the work of two people.

All managers understand the temptation to prolong the inevitable termination. Who's got time to do it and look for a better replacement? Yet they understand the eroding morale that results when an ineffective employee is allowed to remain too long.

So how do we fire people in a God-honoring way? It's not an oxymoron. It's possible and it happens frequently in the best Christian workplaces. Here are some principles.

1. Hire the best. Nordstrom's, the highly regarded national department store, reports that their "employee manual" is pretty thin because they invest time and money in finding and hiring the best people, who don't need rules, regulations and bureaucracy. Invest more time up front and you'll likely have fewer terminations later. Hire slower, fire faster.

2. Define success for every team member. Bob Andringa, president of the Council of Christian Colleges & Universities, recommends every new hire knows the answers to these six questions:

- What am I expected to do?
- Why is it important?
- Do I have authority to do it?
- When I need help, where can I get it?
- To whom can I give my ideas?
- How am I doing so far?

(For Andringa's subpoints, go to www.CMAonline.org/mrc.)

3. Create the correct expectations. Here are two possible responses when a person is terminated:

■ Response A: "Well, I assumed that since this was a Christian organization, my husband would have been treated better. The way he got fired and the timing were just terrible."

■ Response B: "Thank you. You fired me in a very respectful way. Whether I agree or disagree, you handled this difficult decision with professionalism and sensitivity."

We've all heard the first response, but I've never heard the second one, and probably never will. In workshops around the country, I ask this question, "Raise your hand if you know someone who was fired and thought it was handled appropriately."

You're right. No hands are ever raised. And it's naïve of

managers to think a person being fired will ever be grateful, or even respectful. Unfortunately, we haven't created a culture or climate for this to happen.

However, this can be mitigated—if you create the right expectations. For example, I encourage pastors to give the following message to their congregations at least once a year:

"We have a large paid staff with hundreds of volunteers. It's likely that in this next year or two, one or more of them will need to move on. Maybe the job will outgrow their abilities or we'll have personality clashes we can't resolve. Perhaps someone just isn't effective—we may have made a bad hiring decision and it's totally our fault.

"If that happens, here's how we'll attempt to terminate this team member in a God-honoring way." [And then explain your process.]

"We'll try very hard to resolve the situation, but if it does come to a termination, please know that few people (outside of those involved) will have all the facts and you'll have to trust that we've done this with integrity. Don't choose up sides—just pray for those involved, and we'll all get through this together."

Occasionally, in the right situation, I've given a terminated employee a helpful book that reinforces the biblical principle of honoring those in authority (whether the leader or manager is right or wrong). I recommend *A Tale of Three Kings: A Study in Brokenness*, by Gene Edwards.

4. Create a thriving workplace. Dennis Bakke's new book, *Joy at Work: A Revolutionary Approach to Fun on the Job* (to be published in March), offers a radical approach to making the workplace "fun"—one of four company-wide values he pioneered as co-founder and president of The AES Corporation (for details, go to www.dennisbakke.com).

Bakke (a keynote panelist and workshop leader at CMA Long Beach 2005) offers a model for the 21st century organization that treats employees with respect, gives them unprecedented responsibility, and holds them strictly accountable—"because it's the right thing to do, not just because it makes good business sense."

Joy at Work is radical, but thoroughly biblical. Implement this approach and you'll likely have fewer terminations and a more God-honoring workplace.

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