

Firing

Firing with Compassion

by Joel Peterson

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Summary. The author, chairman of JetBlue and an adjunct professor at Stanford, has fired plenty of people during his long career—and he’s been fired himself. In this article he outlines an empathetic approach in which the manager recognizes that he or she played a role in... [more](#)

In early 2007, after nearly a decade of growth, JetBlue was struggling. A Valentine’s Day ice storm at New York’s Kennedy International Airport had stranded hundreds of passengers on the tarmac for hours and revealed glaring weaknesses in JetBlue’s operating systems. After

much deliberation, the board concluded that JetBlue's brilliant founder and largest shareholder, David Neeleman, was no longer right to lead the company. We needed a new CEO.

As lead director at the time, I would be the one to deliver the news to David. With another director, I went to his office and told him, clearly and directly, that we'd decided to replace him and briefly explained why. To soften the blow, we asked him to stay on as chairman of the board. David was upset. He said we were making a mistake. We listened but were resolute. When he finished, we moved the discussion to next steps, including the public announcement of the leadership change.

More than a decade later, David continues to think we made the wrong decision. But he and I have maintained a long-running, cordial professional relationship. I still consider him to be the greatest commercial airline entrepreneur of all time, and I personally invested in his launch of Azul, a low-cost airline based in Brazil, where he was born.

How can you fire someone in a fair and decent way? As a longtime operating executive, board member, and investor in hundreds of start-ups, I've had to terminate many dozens of people over the years—and I've always tried to do it while preserving their dignity and self-esteem and, often, my connection with them. I also teach a leadership course on difficult conversations at Stanford, and some former students joke that the class is mostly about the right way to fire people. I base those lessons primarily on my own experience, because research studies on the topic are few and far between.

Of course, I still get anxious before I tell someone that he or she is being let go. But with time I have become more adept at this vital and underappreciated task of management, and I want other bosses to do the same. The best leaders are just as good at removing people from jobs for which they're unsuited as they are at putting rising stars into the right positions. It isn't possible to be error-free in hiring—and even if it were, organizations change, roles shift, and you may find that even highly skilled employees can't adapt. Although laying

someone off because of a reorganization or a business downturn is different from firing someone for poor performance, many of the tips in this article still apply.

The key to effective, humane firing is to focus on how you treat people during the process. Every situation is different, and no matter what your HR executives or corporate lawyers may tell you, there's no standard script for letting someone go. Too many termination "best practices" are driven by fears of being sued. We must instead treat people with fairness and empathy. Here's how:

1. Don't Wait for a "Firing Offense"

Good managers are compassionate, which leads many to procrastinate, repeatedly giving underperformers "one last chance." Some bosses wait for a dramatic event or an ethical breach to clearly justify the firing. Avoid this trap. Building a top team requires constantly assessing the organization and its members—to identify who can grow into a larger role and whose skill development isn't up to par. Document the smaller, quieter moments of underperformance and establish a trend line. Try coaching, training, and other methods to fix the problem. But recognize when someone has become a "net drainer," whose performance and attitude are infecting the rest of the team. When that situation can't be fixed quickly, it's time to act.



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In her book *Radical Candor*, Kim Scott, formerly an Apple University faculty member and a manager at Google, lists four lies managers tell themselves to avoid firing people: (1) The person's performance will get better. (2) Having somebody in the role is better than having nobody while we look to fill it. (3) It's smarter to transfer the person to another department than to fire him or her. (4) Firing the person will be bad for morale. "Most managers wait far too long to [fire people] because they have fooled themselves into believing it's unnecessary," Scott writes. My advice is the same: Don't fool yourself —and don't wait.

2. Do Be Willing to Fire Friends or Family

One reason organizations have anti-nepotism policies is that once you've hired a friend or a relative, it can be challenging to fire him or her. People also routinely develop genuine friendships on the job, and those relationships can complicate a manager's duty to make personnel changes. Nonetheless, there can be no sacred cows. Good leaders separate the personal from the professional. They clearly and frequently communicate to any friends and family members on their

teams that they cannot provide protection should those people underperform. And when the time comes, they act as decisively as they would with any other employee.

3. Don't Surprise People

This is a mistake we made with David at JetBlue: The board had previously given him glowing reviews and hadn't adequately warned him that we were considering replacing him, so when we did, it came as a shock. Don't make the same mistake. Everyone—from the C-suite to the lower ranks—deserves frequent feedback. This is especially true if people are falling short of goals. If someone is surprised at being fired, it's a sign that you've failed not in the termination conversation but in your evaluation and review processes. Few dismissals happen over a single event. The vast majority should come only after several discussions between boss and employee and perhaps the implementation of a performance improvement plan (PIP) in which the problem is clearly documented and the underachiever put on notice. In many cases, people put on a PIP will start to look for other jobs, which may make it unnecessary to fire them. Ensuring that you've given detailed critiques over time and offered a PIP is also a good way to head off any threat of a lawsuit. "In my experience," explains Patty McCord, the former chief talent officer at Netflix, "people sue their employers because they think they've been treated unfairly...because they weren't told the truth when they should have been about their performance or their fit." She's right.

4. Do Prepare and Practice

Rehearsing for difficult conversations may be the single best way to prepare for them. It may be useful to role-play with an HR person or someone else who can run through a range of reactions to see how you handle each scenario.

But don't underestimate the usefulness of preparing on your own. Before entering a termination discussion, I engage in a series of self-talk exercises designed to reinforce the necessity of the action and put myself in the right mindset. Some of them emphasize the need to act with grace and gravitas. ("*Letting this person go is one of my most important tasks. I will do it with the utmost sensitivity.*") I also remind

myself that as a manager, I deserve some of the blame for the person's failure, owing to poor hiring or coaching. (*"This results from my mistakes as well as hers."*) And, to avoid becoming defensive, I focus on the optimal outcome. (*"I want to help this person find a place where he can maximize his potential—a place that better fits his skills, personality, ambitions, and style of working."*)

5. Don't Hand Off the Dirty Work

No one likes to fire people. No one likes *being* fired either. (I know this firsthand: It has happened to me.) But the only thing people like less than being fired by the boss is being fired by an HR director or a hired gun. Remember the George Clooney and Anna Kendrick characters in the movie *Up in the Air*? Many companies hand responsibility for firing to outsiders like them instead of to employees' bosses. To me, that is a cold, harsh, and uncaring practice—one I'll never use.



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That's not to say you can't have an HR person involved. It's smart to go over a termination conversation with an HR professional ahead of time; he or she has more expertise and experience in this task than most other managers and will be able to offer you good advice. In some situations you might also want that person to accompany you to the termination meeting to serve as a witness and answer technical

questions about severance or benefits continuation, about which you may lack knowledge. My preference is to begin the conversation one-on-one; after I've done the hard part, I ask HR to join.

Not doing your own firing is a failure to “clean up after yourself.” Eventually the whole organization will pick up on your inability to face tough issues.

6. Do Deliver the Message Immediately and Clearly

When you've decided to let someone go, schedule a meeting and deliver the message within the first 30 seconds of sitting down: “We've decided to make a change/terminate your position/replace you.” To drag it out—which many managers do out of discomfort at delivering painful news—invites misunderstanding and awkwardness. It also gets in the way of moving promptly to next steps—organizing the departure in a way that is most helpful to the employee and least disruptive to the organization. Throughout the discussion, play it straight: Attempts at humor or displays of emotion or commiseration risk causing offense or misunderstanding. The sooner you deliver the basic message and shift the discussion to severance, benefits, and the transition plan, the better.

7. Don't Overexplain the Decision

A termination meeting is a time to communicate a decision—not to debate it, defend it, or negotiate it. It's natural for people being fired to seek more information—to repeatedly ask variants of the question *Why?* You needn't offer an elaborate answer; instead, give a simple explanation for the decision—whether it's due to performance issues, needed cutbacks, or the elimination of roles or functions. If you've done a reasonable job of providing feedback, coaching, and context on the dynamics of your workplace before this conversation, the employee already has sufficient information. But this conversation isn't about rationale; it's about logistics, including announcing the decision internally and externally and explaining severance arrangements. If the person insists on defending himself, avoid the temptation to engage.

8. Do Be Human

Good bosses aren't automatons. They should recognize that employees who are being fired will feel an unpleasant mix of emotions. They should listen patiently to any reactions and carefully calibrate their responses. It's natural to feel sympathy or regret that you're firing someone, but expressing those emotions may encourage an attempt to leverage sympathy and debate the decision. As they deal with their own emotions, bosses must recognize the difference between empathy and compassion (which are useful in this context) and sympathy or sorrow (which can be counterproductive).

Depending on your prior relationship and the context, you might want to follow up once both parties' immediate feelings abate. Offer to set a time and place outside the office to meet and talk about the person's coming job search, potential target companies, people in your network who might help, what you'll say during a reference check—and perhaps your advice on how to be successful in the next position. Be aware, however, that such a meeting may not be feasible. Research has shown that people tend to develop negative feelings toward those who communicate bad news, even when it's done with consideration and kindness. That said, I've usually been able to maintain friendly to neutral relationships with people I've fired.

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Managers should also realize that even though the formal employment relationship is ending, the departing employee probably has many personal relationships with coworkers. If those people believe you haven't dealt fairly or courteously with the person being let go, morale and engagement are likely to suffer. Failing to treat a fired employee graciously can also come back to hurt the business: Some industries are small, and the person you're firing today may work for a customer or a supplier tomorrow. Particularly in knowledge-intensive industries, relationships with ex-employees are valuable, which is why many organizations maintain "alumni associations" made up not only of those who moved on voluntarily but also those who weren't given an opportunity to stay.

9. Don't Shift the Blame

Another common mistake people make when firing an employee is to imply that “the devil made me do it” or “I’m just the messenger.” In this scenario, the manager blames the decision on someone else—the board or some higher-level executive—and seeks to avoid incurring the terminated employee’s anger. That is a cop-out. Most firing decisions are made with at least some collaboration; at the CEO level it’s always a collective decision by the board. But even in those cases, the one communicating the decision should feel and express personal responsibility for it—and not pass the buck.

10. Do Be Generous

It is usually wise for the organization to offer a generous severance package—and bosses should use their influence to get the best one possible. You are buying peace (because someone who accepts a severance package waives the right to litigate), assuaging some of the guilt you may feel, and giving the terminated employee a fair chance to start over. Although the specifics may vary according to the position being left, a good package should contain (a) financial severance, (b) professional outplacement assistance, (c) specific information about compensation for vacation pay and other earned benefits, (d) specific information on continuing health insurance, (e) a plan for providing references, (f) an agreed-upon internal and external communication plan (ideally, one that allows for a resignation rather than an official firing), and (g) the signing of a legal release.

The benefits of being generous include not only saving on potential legal fees but also reducing internal strife, since other employees upset about the firing will find news of the nice exit package reassuring. In general, severance should accord with the employee’s tenure. But as you make this judgment, recognize that when a newcomer fails to perform, some of the blame falls on the hiring manager; that should make the company more willing to cover some of the terminated individual’s financial losses.

CONCLUSION

Firing someone is never a pleasant experience. You needn't learn to enjoy it—only sadists do. You needn't even get to the point where it doesn't cause anxiety. But if you want to be an effective leader over the long term, you must become able to do it well.

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