



A Kind Word Helps

Advice for Managers who Must Let Employees Go

Heroes come in all sizes, and you don't have to be a giant hero. You can be a very small hero. It's just as important to understand that accepting self-responsibility for the things you do, having good manners, caring about other people—these are heroic acts. Everybody has the choice of being a hero or not being a hero every day of their lives.

George Lucas, film director, as quoted in *Time* magazine, April 26, 1999

If you lay off one or more staff members, what impact will your actions have on those who leave and those who remain? Are you likely to lose the commitment of your best people who will worry about their positions? Or will morale *increase* because you handled the terminated employees with dignity?

The Five O'Clock Club, the nation's leading job coaching and outplacement company, recently conducted a survey of fired employees to discover how they felt about the way terminations were handled at their organizations.

- ◆ In the exit interview, job performance was covered 94% of the time. 82% of the time employees were not given any positive feedback about their performance.
- ◆ In fact, only 11% of long-term employees—people who had worked at the company for over five to 20 years—received a positive word.
- ◆ **69% of workers said they would not or definitely would not recommend the organization to fellow job seekers.**
- ◆ 42% rated the impact on their job search as negative or very negative.

Why Say a Kind Word?

Termination with dignity protects corporate profitability. If you say a kind word to employees during dismissal, they are much more likely to be positive about

the organization, recommending the organization to a friend who is looking for a job and recommending the company's products and services.

In addition, unpleasant firing practices can negatively impact the employee's future job search, destroy morale for your remaining employees, and increase the chance of lawsuits. Allowing people to keep their dignity serves all parties involved in the process well.

Employees are more likely to say a kind word about the employer if the employer says a kind word to them during the exit process.

Can a Kind Word Get You in Trouble?

Alan Sklover, the well-known employee's attorney, says the risks of saying a kind word are overblown. The things HR and managers can say to "get into trouble" are quite limited to:

- ◆ commitments to give, pay or do something;
- ◆ things that would suggest a discriminatory mindset;
- ◆ things that are negative, attacking or humiliating, whether about the employee, the company, or the decision to terminate the person.

Mr. Sklover suggests managers consider kind words such as these:

- ◆ "Your being let go does not mean anything negative about you, personally. To the contrary, you are universally considered a kind, considerate and compassionate person." [Ego Support]
- ◆ "You have made considerable and

long-lasting contributions, and they are acknowledged and appreciated." [Reputation confirmation]

- ◆ "You have many good friends here. We hope those friendships will continue." [Relation continuation]
- ◆ "I understand the many emotions you might be feeling right now. You have every right to feel that way." [Emotional support]
- ◆ "Loss of employment is undoubtedly a difficult experience. We're confident you have the ability to overcome this setback." [Confidence building]

Here are a few tips from the experts at the Five O'Clock Club (www.fiveo'clockclub.com):

- ◆ **Be Honest:** Tell the employee what went wrong. People are more likely to go forward if they are given an explanation.
- ◆ **Be Positive:** Yes, a kind word helps. For example, "George, you've been a trooper. I'm sorry that the organization has moved in a different direction."
- ◆ **Be Compassionate:** Allow separated employees a "decompression period" in familiar surroundings. Let them have some control over how they leave. If possible, let them finish tasks they want to finish and make arrangements for keeping in touch with co-workers.
- ◆ **Be pragmatic:** Have available full written summaries of severance benefits prepared with as much care as the benefit booklets handed to new hires.
- ◆ **Seek Closure:** Discuss other issues such as professional references, so the employee can formulate a strategy to move forward.
- ◆ **Help Them to Move On:** Provide your employees with the kind of outplacement that gives them dignity while positioning them for the future.





Be prepared to review his or her strong points with each employee

Even in a termination-for-performance where skills or personality were not adequate for a particular situation, you can *still* acknowledge the person's assets and abilities. Remember: A generous dollar settlement usually *cannot erase bitter memories of uncaring or even unkind words*. **Indeed, in those few cases in which former employees have taken legal action, it usually has revolved around treatment during the separation process.**

“The Package”

An important element in enhancing an organization's reputation is the quality of “the package,” which allows the individual to *move forward* professionally and personally. Termination with dignity presupposes that “the package” will include:

- ♦ severance pay,
- ♦ professional support for the process of finding a new position (i.e., outplacement and other services) *as soon as possible after the termination*, and
- ♦ a discussion to help separated employees understand what combination of severance pay and support services is appropriate.

Carefully prepared (though flexible) positive scripts are an indispensable element of the process.

Managers should have a full description of the termination services ready to distribute: a detailed written explanation of benefits, i.e., outplacement help, education grants, health insurance continuation, and so on.

Information Sharing

While there may be no way to eliminate the element of surprise, there are ways to reduce shock and humiliation in the wake of a downsizing that has been a closely guarded secret. Except in the most unusual of circumstances, there is little justification for so-called “sudden-death” discharges; horror stories abound of fired

Preparedness includes:

- ♦ an agenda for the meeting
- ♦ asking HR to attend the meeting
- ♦ carefully prepared (though flexible) positive scripts
- ♦ plans for taking care of separated employees (including quality monetary packages)
- ♦ a full description of career coaching and other services ready to distribute
- ♦ a list of each employee's contribution and strong points that have been valued over the years
- ♦ work with HR to insure the appropriate payout, benefits package and outplacement support

employees being asked to leave the building immediately, even being escorted from their desks to the door by security. The trusted employee has suddenly become a threat. This creates the impression that the termination is a punishment, causing humiliation and resentment. Some managers assume that this is simply “the way to do it:” it's over, let's make a clean break.

Instead, consider the consequences in each case. Most managers would resent an employee failing to give two weeks' notice; while, of course, the dynamics are different when the separation is the employer's decision, organizations should consider the positives of allowing people a period to finish tasks and make arrangements for

keeping in touch with co-workers while starting with their outplacement services. This may strike some as being highly idealistic, but carrying it off would depend heavily on *how well the reason for the termination has been explained*.

Quotes to Inspire You

He means well, but he means well feebly.
Theodore Roosevelt
(speaking about a political rival)

To feel that one has a place in life solves half the problem of contentment.
George Edward Woodberry, American poet, critic and educator (1855-1930)

In those few cases where the former employee has taken legal action, the reasons for doing so usually have revolved around treatment during the termination meeting.

Therefore, during the meeting, consider the following:

- ♦ The employee wants to know “what went wrong.” People are more likely to be able to go forward if they are given an explanation.
- ♦ The employee is listening for a kind word about past performance.
- ♦ There is the matter of pride: how will the departure be portrayed to the remaining workforce?
- ♦ There are the pragmatics: how am I going to survive? Have available full written summaries of severance benefits—prepared with as much care as the benefit booklets handed to new hires.
- ♦ Discuss other issues, such as professional references, so the employee can formulate a strategy to move forward.
- ♦ Allow people to return to familiar surroundings—to proceed with some degree of normalcy for the time being. This is part of the empowering process.