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When Is It Time to Fire Someone?

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Learn the difference between giving your employees some well-deserved freedom versus letting them walk all over you.

In this stressed, 24/7-networked world — where clients and customers expect a rapid-speed reply to e-mails, texts and Twitter feeds — how does a manager or business owner give overworked employees room to breathe and still ensure the job gets done?

The same technology that allows for quick business communication can also make it easier for employees to check personal e-mail and Facebook at the office, work from home, or check into the office while traveling. While these can be inherently positive things for a workplace, at what point does an employee's behavior become suspect or even warrant dismissal?

The firing line

"Firing-worthy offenses vary from company to company, but there are some universal offenses," says Christina Stovall, director of the Human Resource Service Center at Odyssey OneSource, a human resource outsourcing firm.

But we're not talking about glaringly obvious infractions such as theft, fraud, disclosure of confidential information, or the sale or use of drugs or alcohol on the job. We're referring to the soft side of trying to balance employee satisfaction with maintaining a productive work environment.

That's where the line of demarcation becomes much blurrier. What qualifies as disruptive employee behavior — is it abusing social media, taking frequent breaks, underperforming while telecommuting, or missing too many days of work? How do you measure these infractions in today's constantly connected world, and do they matter if your employees are getting their jobs done?

To be sure, it's rare that one infraction leads to a firing. Companies generally fire people when the problem behavior is cumulative. But deciding how many times is too many is more an art than a science. "The line is crossed when the company determines it has been crossed," says Stovall.

The good news is there are guidelines that can lay a foundation for helping you decide when to fire someone. Here are three things you need to do, as recommended by Rick Dacri, author of "Uncomplicating Management":

Set expectations up front. When employees know exactly what is expected of them, they are better able to follow through with results. Clearly setting expectations works for the employer as well.

"It is best for the company to have policies and procedures in place so employees know what they can and cannot do," says Gabriela Cora, leadership consultant and speaker. "The more specific it is, the better it is, so you don't provide ways for ambiguity and questioning," she says. Ultimately, you want to focus on performance with quantifiable goals.

Hold employees accountable. That means once an employee knows the rules and is given fair warning, he or she must be held accountable. For example, let's say you have a policy that says employees are granted a maximum of four unexplained absences. "Don't wait till the fourth time," says Dacri. "You sit them down the first time. This sends a clear message that you know they're not at work — you care about them but that you need them to get the job done."

Holding employees accountable is especially important for those managers or business owners who allow for telecommuting. "While companies aren't able to monitor their employees every second of the day, they are able to implement safeguards to ensure that the work is being done," says Stovall. Regular conference calls, webinars or Skype calls to touch base and clear deadlines help to keep productivity up.

Communicate frequently. "A lot of performance-related problems can easily be corrected if the manager simply goes up to the employee and speaks to them," says Dacri. Indeed, there isn't one managerial issue that communication can't effectively resolve. Take, for example, telecommuting employees. When their production slips, they don't show up for meetings, or you can't get in touch with them via e-mail or phone — even if this all happens just once — it's time to talk.

The truth is, if you hire the right people to begin with, open communication, trust and mutual respect will follow. "With a strong team in place, you can have open dialogue and promote a trust environment where employees feel they can approach their manager with issues as well as successes," says Stovall.

Remember: Know when to hold employees accountable, and don't assume the worst of your team by keeping them on a tight leash. Allowing a little Facebook and personal e-mail (or some other leniencies) might mean building a lot of trust and a happy, productive work force in the long term.

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