

How Can Good Workers Be Bad?

By Markku Kauppinen

A recent *Wall Street Journal* article titled “Firing Good Workers Who Are A Bad Fit” focused on how to deal in situations where an employee “is doing their work passably or even better but are not suited for the job for reasons ranging from personal chemistry to mismatched skills”. The article cited a few examples of situations where an employee was a good person but simply was not the right fit for the job.

The article also provided several suggestions regarding how to fire an employee in a way that was fair to him/her and would avoid legal repercussions. My favorite one: Tell the employee in person. I guess this must be mentioned now as so many employees around the world have been fired with a text message. What happened to common sense?

But is the main issue really how to gently fire an employee? Could these types of problems be avoided in the first place?

It certainly is true that some people will not do well in specific jobs. There are many reasons for their lack of success. Perhaps they do not have the necessary skills. Typically, however, employers and managers are quite good at assessing if a prospective employee has the right skills. Usually they are pretty accurate at determining that. More often, however, it is that they do not have “that certain something” or, like the *Wall Street Journal* article suggested, they do not have the right “personal chemistry”.

That is a much harder thing to evaluate. In the past I remember interviewing a lot of people who really impressed me. I was not so impressed when they showed up on the payroll only a couple of weeks later. I used to ask myself: “Is this really the same person who made me think he is the one I need to hire? What happened?!!”

Some of these bad hires created unbelievable headaches for me. They were not bad people. They were not bad workers but they definitely were not working in the right job. But for a few months we were stuck with one another trying different ways to make a small miracle happen – changing a person into somebody else. It never worked and it usually ended badly. It always cost the organization a lot of money.

This is challenging and frustrating stuff. I have seen many approaches to dealing with it. One is very straightforward: This is the mold. Everyone must fit into it. If they do not, they have no place here!

The advantage of this approach is that it is very clear. There is no gray area. It is a “Yes or No” model that simplifies the decision-making process. It is quick and efficient.

However, it fails miserably when one does not know exactly what he is looking for. Often this model becomes an exercise in cloning as the hiring manager is trying to hire people who are exactly like him. Other times one thinks he is using a mold but the mold actually keeps changing because it so subjective. It has few components that are easy to quantify, but many others that are really just based on intuition, gut feeling and experience. While these are certainly valuable and important, they are also fickle and inconsistent.

So, how should one deal with the issue of “bad personal chemistry”? How can an organization improve its personnel decisions and make sure that it takes advantage of its good workers?

I get asked these questions all of the time. Without better knowledge of the particulars, they are impossible questions to answer without being too general. However, it is not difficult to explore the situation a little deeper and then determine with a great deal of specificity what kind of employee will succeed in a particular job.

Start by identifying the behaviors that are needed to succeed in a job. Make sure that you prioritize them so that you create realistic expectations. Avoid making the mistake that is so easy to make: looking for a person who can walk on water. Just for fun read some of the employment ads in your local newspaper and quickly realize that no one, except Superman or Wonderwoman, is able to meet those requirements. I understand that they are not looking for a new gig at the moment.

Once you have determined these behavioral requirements, measure them in your job candidates. Use validated tools that measure who the person really is and not what the person thinks you want to hear. Some tools are designed to measure how a person thinks they need to be in a certain environment. This is not the time to use such tools. I would also strongly suggest that you use your existing employees to help in determining what creates success. This is a process we call “mapping”. You simply select your top performers for a job and identify what behaviors result in the top performance. There is always a common behavioral component in the successful employees.

Next simply determine how closely the candidate aligns against the behavioral requirement that you created. Use that in helping you to make better decisions in ensuring that there is a good fit.

While using this process will not guarantee that you will have a successful hire every single time, it will significantly improve you the number of good decisions you make. As a result, it will definitely reduce situations where you are wondering who the stranger in your payroll is. Who hired him?

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If They Don't Care, Don't Waste Your Time

By Marshall Goldsmith

My mother was a first-grade schoolteacher back in Kentucky. In her mind, I was always in the first grade, my father was a first grader, and all of our relatives were in the first grade. Mom was always correcting Dad's grammar. Whenever he made a grammatical error, she would give him that stern first-grade-teacher look and bark, "Bill! Bill!" For some reason, we decided to buy a talking bird. Within a couple of months, the bird was chirping, "Bill! Bill!" Now poor old Dad was even being corrected by the bird!

One day when Dad was 80 years old, Mom began her thousandth grammar lesson. He looked up at her, smiled, and sighed in his crackling voice, "Honey, I'm 80 years old. Let it go!"

Does my mom sound familiar to you? Have you ever tried to change the behavior of someone who had absolutely no interest in changing? How much luck did you have in this religious-conversion activity? My guess is none. How much time did you waste? My guess is lots.

I have asked these questions of hundreds of people. Sometimes the context is the office, and sometimes the context is the home. But their answers are almost always the same: "I have spent a lot of time and produced no results. In fact, I am only succeeding in frustrating myself and annoying the people I want to change!"

These efforts can be particularly nettlesome at work. As an executive coach, I have a unique business model for my work: I don't get paid if my clients don't get better. "Better" is not determined by me, nor is it decided by the person I coach. The preselected stakeholders who work with the person I coach ultimately judge if he or she has improved.

I will never forget the first time I didn't get paid for my coaching activities. What was my biggest problem in this case? My ego. *The Wall Street Journal* had just ranked me as one of the world's leading executive educators. This went straight to my head, you might say. I started believing I was so great that I could save people. I had the delusional fantasy that other people would get better solely because of my presence.

My client really didn't care. He had a problem treating people with respect. He didn't care about the people he managed, and he certainly didn't care about me and my newly won reputation. When I asked him why his coworkers felt he did not respect them, he grunted, "Because they are all fools!" This comment should have been a hint. I should have said good-bye. But no. I believed I was one of the world's leading consultants, remember? Unfortunately, I was being one of the world's dumbest consultants.

When working with this uncaring client, I began to feel that I was aimlessly pounding my head against a brick wall. After 18 months of complete failure, I cut my losses and admitted defeat. I learned three hard lessons:

1. I can't *make* people change if they have no interest in changing.
2. "Big ego" and "money-back guarantee" don't mix.
3. For a brief spell, I had turned into my mother.

For you, I have an equally hard lesson: You can't change people, either.

As a coach, I have finally learned to work only with dedicated leaders who are committed to personal improvement -- great people who want to become even more effective. I work with people who care. I help executives change only what they have chosen to change, because that's all I can do.

If you are a manager, you need to qualify the people whom you are coaching in the same way I

qualify the clients I coach. Your time is very limited. You are probably too busy now. Invest your valuable time only where you will get a return. The time that you are wasting in attempting to coach people who don't care is time that is stolen from helping the people who do.

I know that sounds harsh, but you really don't have a choice. What can you do with a person who doesn't care? Knowing when to let go, as I ultimately did with my uncaring client, is perhaps the hardest aspect of coaching. But once it's clear that your message isn't going to get across, you have but one option.

As a Buddhist, one of my goals is to help you have a happier life. Do you have any objection to this goal? If you are still trying to change people who don't care -- either at work or at home -- let it go. If you never learn anything else from me, please remember this. You'll not only have a more productive life, you'll be happier, too.

Dr. Marshall Goldsmith recently been named by the American Management Association as one of 50 great thinkers and business leaders who have impacted the field of management. His 18 books include the Business Week best-seller, *The Leader of the Future* and *Global Leadership: The Next Generation*. Marshall is a world authority in helping successful leaders achieve positive change in behavior: for themselves, their people and their teams.