One Bad Apple

Strategies for Dealing with the Underachieving Employee

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Popular wisdom would tell you that hiring and training an employee is so expensive to the organization that firing employees should be nigh impossible.

I'm here to tell you that popular wisdom is wrong.

"Do not rely upon what has been acquired by repeated tradition..."

- Buddha
Truth and Myth

Interviewing, hiring, and training costs the organization a lot of money.
TRUE

*It takes most employees a full year to ramp up.*
- Month 3 “I think I’m in over my head.”
- Month 6 “I’m not qualified – this is overwhelming!”
- Month 9 “Aha!”
- Month 12 “I’ve totally got this.”

Employees are an organizational investment.
TRUE

There’s no such thing as a bad employee.
MYTH
Inconvenient truths

**Bad**

*adjective*

1. of poor quality; inferior or defective.

*Synonyms:* substandard, poor, inferior, second-rate, second-class, unsatisfactory, inadequate, unacceptable, not up to scratch, not up to par, deficient, imperfect, defective, faulty, shoddy, amateurish, careless, negligent

- Bad employees exist.
- You have at least one in your workplace.
- Management is complicit in both their badness and their retention.
More important truths

- *Bad employees exist.*
- Being a bad employee doesn’t make them a bad person.
- *You have at least one in your workplace.*
- At least 17% of your time each week will be spent on bad employees.
  - Some estimates put the figure as high as 80% of your management time.
- *Management is complicit in both their badness and their retention.*
- Recognizing a bad employee doesn’t make you a bad person.
Managing underperforming employees takes up a disproportionate amount of time.

Let’s review the keys to retaining good people.
- Pay
- Benefits
- Opportunity
- **The team / equitable treatment / leadership**

What do you think would happen if you were able to shift your focus to an 80/20 focus on the outstanding employees?
How Do You Identify Toxic Employees?

Wouldn’t it be great if they came with labels?
Pro Tip: Follow the Drama

![Graph showing the rate at which people create drama as a function of how often they declare they hate drama and always avoid it.](http://xkcd.com)
The Toxic Trio

These three types create and encourage discord, drama, negativity, and resentment.
The Parasite

Keys to Identification

Behaviors:
• Self-aggrandizement
• Stealing “eggs”
• Takes on much, accomplishes little

Habitats:
• Water cooler/breakroom
• Behind the desk
• Hobnobbing

Common calls:
• I
• Me
• “when I was”
The Victim

Keys to Identification

Behaviors:
• Shirking responsibility
• Persecution complex
• Making mountains from mole hills

Habitats:
• HR Office
• Flock

Common calls:
• You
• Why
• Who
And finally...

The Underminer

Keys to Identification

Behaviors:
• Negativity
• Gossip
• Revenge

Habitats:
• Ubiquitous
• The “after-meeting” meeting

Common calls:
• Never
• Did you hear…
• That’s not my...

The mockingbird family, Melvin Yap. CC license https://flic.kr/p/e527c
Field Guide to Identification

The EEEEk! Principle

Effort – is the employee trying?
Engagement – is the employee engaged in the organization’s goals?
Entrenchment – is the employee resistant to change?
Entitlement – is the employee focused on the team or themselves?
How to Move On

Or, more accurately, How to Help the Employee Move On
Step 1 - Get the “But”s out of the way.

- But I didn’t learn how to do this in library school!
- But Bad Employee really is a good person.
- But HR never fires anyone!
- But I don’t want to risk it scaring my other employees.
- But I didn’t even hire Bad Employee in the first place!
- But I don’t know where to start.
5 Simple Steps


2.) Find a balanced narrative.

3.) Assess salvageability.

4.) Create a SMART plan.

5.) Follow through and remain
   a.) Calm
   b.) Consistent
   c.) Criteria driven
Know Your Playing Field

Federal/State/County/City Employment Laws

Organizational Policy and Procedure

Human Resources

Tradition (the unwritten rules)
Structure

- Job Description
  - Does the employee have a copy?
  - Is it reviewed and updated every year?
    - With employee input and signatures?
  - Does it accurately reflect your expectations?
- Performance Appraisals
  - Performed annually?
  - The process includes goal setting?
  - Progress is reviewed at least quarterly?
  - Goals are SMART?
    - Specific
    - Measurable
    - Attainable
    - Realistic
    - Time-bound
Managing For Performance

- Document. Document. Document. (Yes, I will KEEP repeating this.)
- Use your tools
  - Verbal warnings
  - Mentoring
  - Written warnings
    - Understand your progressive discipline policy and where it does/doesn’t apply.
- Performance Plans
- Training
- Immediate feedback

“Goals begin behaviors, consequences maintain them.”

— Kenneth H. Blanchard, The One Minute Manager
“People don’t leave bad companies. They leave bad bosses. They leave flawed leadership.”
Tips for Giving Feedback

- Usually (but not always) in private
  - Public offenses should be stopped in the moment.
- Orally or in writing
  - But always follow up in writing even if it’s just email
- Always from a rational perspective
  - Never give feedback when you’re angry/upset

**Phrases to use:**
- I have concerns...
- We need to discuss...
- I noticed...
- Let’s review...
- You committed to...

**Phrases to avoid:**
- You are being...
- Jane told me...
- I was asked to...
- I’m sorry...
- I don’t want to...

*Your employees can be your friends, but not your buddies.*
A Prelude to Parting Ways

**Successful Mentoring is Built on Trust**

Most underperforming employees are unhappy. Can they be coached either out of their unhappiness or to recognize it?

Fear.
Uncertainty.
Doubt.
If they can’t break the FUD cycle, you can’t help them.

*You do WANT to help them, right?*
Is your relationship one in which they can/will they accept your mentoring?
Yes! Are you committed to helping them?
No. Find someone else who can help.

n.b. This really needs to be a flow chart. ;-)
Parting Ways

You’ve mentored, corrected, documented. Nothing worked. What you need to know about the termination discussion.

• They never see it coming. Never.
• Minimize the possibility of legal action.
• Provide a positive exit.
• Be direct and clear. (Don’t bury the lede.)
• Don’t apologize.
• Do be sensitive but don’t be a therapist.
• Do keep it short.
• Be honest and sensitive with your employees.
Hiring for Fit

Cultivate the culture you want to reflect.

Cultivate a culture of collegial success and support.

Your next Hire - hire for **fit**.

• Hire hungry (people who have desire)
• Hire smart (people who can synthesize)
• Hire for growth (people who can move up)
• Check references (do not skip this step)
• Test!
Even after a careful hiring process, training, and mentoring, some employees will not be able or willing to do what they were hired to do. It may be that they are difficult personalities, or maybe they’re kind, loyal people who try hard but are just in the wrong job.

With many of these employees, mentoring and performance coaching will not solve the problem. The correct solution is to help the person move to a more appropriate job — maybe in your company, maybe somewhere else.
How do you know who is salvageable?

Easy.

The ones who WANT to be salvaged.

HINT:
These aren’t the ones that keep you up at night.
They aren’t the ones that everyone has to walk on eggshells around.
These aren’t the ones that pushed you to sit through this webinar.
Resources

NoLo Resources for Performance Management

State Labor Laws
http://www.dol.gov/whd/state/state.htm

Federal Labor Laws
http://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/majorlaws

NoLo Termination Guidelines

The New One Minute Manager, by Ken Blanchard
Reading List

https://www.themuse.com/advice/3-lessons-i-learned-from-firing-someone
http://workplaceinsiders.com/tag/toxic-employees/
http://www.forbes.com/sites/erikaandersen/2012/04/30/dont-get-held-hostage-to-bad-employees/#2715e4857a0b3968ab841772
https://www.thomasinternational.net/en-gb/whatsyourissue/Spendlesstimewithpoorperformers.aspx
Thank you!

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