

THE UNDER ACHIEVER



MENTOR? TERMINATE?

By Stephanie Ramsey; *The Foresight Companies, LLC*

As a business owner or manager, there are times when you're faced with employee performance issues. These employees are usually not your worst employee or brightest star.

They did not commit fraud or anything that would lead you to move to immediate termination. They just don't seem to be the most comfortable fit. Owners and managers eventually reach a point where they feel they must make a difficult decision. Should they let an employee go and find a replacement or should they keep them on and hope to help them improve their less than stellar performance?

Well-known quotes and proverbs may start racing through your mind such as "roll the dice and hope for the best" or "the devil you know is better than the one you don't know" when faced with this type of situation. The bottom line is this, however: you need to decide to either mentor the existing employee or terminate them and hire a replacement.

Here are a few questions that you should ask yourself when determining whether to mentor or terminate an employee:

- Are personal feelings impacting this decision?
- Are my expectations for the employee reasonable?

- Are my expectations reasonable given the position and the work load?
- Can this employee improve?
Do they want to improve?
- Is it possible they could be successful elsewhere in the business?

Are your personal feelings impacting the decision about an employee's job performance? Perception is a powerful but subjective issue. The question becomes, "can this subjective issue turn into an objective observation?" If possible, have the employee's performance reviewed, based upon the employee's job description, by an objective individual.

If the objective reviewer concludes that the employee is performing several of the key elements of their job in an adequate fashion then the question is, "why did termination come to mind?" Is this a personal decision that can be addressed through mentoring? Or, if performance is still the key factor, can the performance issues be mentored?

Frequently, the demand on employees or on the position they fill changes due to increased calls or staffing chang-

ing within the business. When you have an employee who is sitting on the bubble of being adequate, pull out their job description and review it. Determine whether or not your expectations for the employee and for the position are reasonable for the work load. Make adjustments as needed. If they are reasonable, mentor the employee on your expectations and discuss the fact that they are failing to meet those expectations. Provide suggestions to the employee on how they can successfully meet your expectation.

Whether or not an employee can improve or wants to improve is a difficult question to answer. Many employees tell you they want to improve but take no action to do so. It is important when mentoring an employee, you provide them very specific examples of how they can improve their performance in certain areas. Meet with the employee at frequent intervals to discuss their progress. For example, have the first follow-up meeting two weeks after the first review meeting so you can provide a clear indication of whether or not you are seeing any improvement. If you fail to see any or little improvement during the follow up meetings, this is clear indication that mentoring is not working and you need to move to termination.

Sometimes, it is not just mentoring an employee in their current position that should be considered. It is possible they are a “round peg in a square hole”? Have you considered that they may be more suited for another position? For example, is a funeral director better suited to do preneed sales? Obviously funeral services owners and managers cannot create an endless stream of job positions for employees. However, if you have other positions available, you may consider them before termination.

Mentoring can be a very informal process. Unfortunately, the “just follow Bill and do whatever he tells you to do” mentality tends to be unsuccessful. Mentoring, especially in terms of correcting behavior, must allow for the mea-

surement of improvement. That doesn't mean it has to be a complex spreadsheet. Both parties have to understand what the criteria are for improvement and the measurement by which the employee is being compared. It may be clear an area for improvement is providing GPL's to families during the arrangement conference as well as discussing payments for those arrangements. Set a deadline for evaluating the employees performance.

Currently the employee is rated a 5 on a 1 to 10 scale, and it is expected that the employee will improve to a 7. The employee should continue to be mentored through this



process (some refer to this as an *Employee Development Plan* or *Improvement Plan*) for as long as necessary assuming the employee continues to make forward progress. If the employee fails to make progress as expected or falls behind, then a predetermined consequence is needed. Typically, language within these plans will state “Failure to meet or exceed these expectations or any display of gross misconduct will result in further disciplinary action, up to and including termination.”

In addition, you may want to stipulate that if there is no significant improvement to indicate that the expectations and goals will be met within the timeline indicated, employment may be terminated prior to agreed timeline. Furthermore,

add language to indicate that failure to maintain performance expectations after the completion of the program may result in additional disciplinary action up to and including termination.

Should mentoring fail or not be an option, then it is likely that the funeral service owner or manager will ultimately decide to terminate the underperforming employee. There is only so long a business can carry the weight of such an employee even if they are well-liked by their co-workers. Realistically such an employee becomes a burden to the other employees and causes poor employee morale.

Clearly termination is a costly and time consuming option.

Funeral home owners and managers must do their best to plan as much as they can for this type of event. Look closely at staff to determine how you can cover the shortfall in the staff scheduling until finding a replacement.

Licensed staff is the most difficult to replace in today's competitive market. It can take weeks to find the "right fit". It is important to assure the remaining staff that management will be moving with speed to replace the position. Assure them that as a team you will make it through the next few weeks. Termination is never pleasant for the employer or the employee. Keep the conversation brief and to the point. There is no detailed explanation needed. Make sure to follow the state requirement in your area for the final paycheck as well as any and all accrued benefits that must be paid. You are not required to provide a reference for the terminated employee.

If the employee asks for one simply inform them that you will only provide information required by law. Make sure they leave the property quietly as there is no reason the other employees or any families onsite should be disturbed.

Mentor or terminate? The answer is not always clear. Either



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direction will take considerable effort from the funeral owner or managers. Termination is likely to be more costly up front due to the cost associated with identifying, hiring, and training a new employee. On the other hand mentoring may or may not be successful and result in simply a delay in locating a replacement. As employees are the single most expensive asset a funeral business has, it is cost effective to at least consider mentoring rather than terminating. It may appear a little daunting but with a little guidance some of those underperformers can turn into your shining stars!

Stephanie Ramsey is the HR Specialist for The Foresight Companies, LLC.