

Three Day Rule- Right Way to Terminate an Employee

In general, people hate confrontation and will do just about anything to distance themselves from it, but a manager owes it to her employees to overcome this fear and address problems directly and honestly. The key is knowing how to handle problems with employees, and knowing what will happen before it happens.

In doing so, one can be prepared ahead of time and not surprised. Anuradha, the General Manager of Bharat Hotels and Resorts Ltd told me she wanted to terminate an employee named Rajlaxmi. I told her that she had to try something first. She had to sit with Rajlaxmi and be truthful about what she was doing wrong.

Anuradha said she was not sure she could tell that to Rajlaxmi's face. She was fearful of the confrontation.

I told her she owed it to Rajlaxmi, to be honest, and to counsel her. Anuradha had nothing to lose since she was planning on terminating Rajlaxmi anyway, so she should use this opportunity as "practice." Using this technique helps take the sting out of being honest, and since a "practice run" is often mired in mistakes, I was encouraging her to forget about mistakes and just go through with the counseling. Also, I told her I would walk her through the process of being empathetic yet firm while practicing mindful counseling skills.

The next day at 10 a.m. Anuradha called Rajlaxmi into her office and invited her to sit at the corner of her desk so they would form a semi-circle rather than facing each other with a table in between them.

Anuradha mentioned that Rajlaxmi had gone through various forms of training and coaching during the last seven months, but she didn't seem to get the hang of the procedures the other employees at the hotel adhered to. Rajlaxmi started to defend herself, but it was time for Anuradha to take charge and lead. Again, she encouraged Rajlaxmi to listen for now and assured her that she would get her turn shortly. Anuradha outlined what was expected of Rajlaxmi, and took care to list behaviors as well as skills sets. She pointed out the various dates and times that Rajlaxmi's training and coaching had taken place.

Rajlaxmi was visibly upset, but she continued to listen as Anuradha spoke. Anuradha went on to say that she liked Rajlaxmi, and there were times when Rajlaxmi did a good job, but it was inconsistent with too much time passing between good performance and poor performance. Then Anuradha asked Rajlaxmi if there was something she could

help her with; for instance, was she facing personal problems that may be affecting her performance? Anuradha then asked if Rajlaxmi was perhaps having difficulties with other people in the office.

After a short pause, Rajlaxmi started making accusations about others' poor performance and asked why she was being picked on. She told Anuradha that she hadn't been trained as well as others and she wasn't sure she liked working for the hotel. Sally acknowledged these statements and told her that, given the challenges, she would like Rajlaxmi to take the rest of the day off (it was Friday) and over the weekend think about her future with the company..

Anuradha added that she would like Rajlaxmi to become a member of the team if she wanted to do so, but her performance had to improve. For instance, pointing fingers at others would have to stop, Rajlaxmi would have to take responsibility for her actions and behaviors, and she must want to work at the hotel and with Anuradha. If Rajlaxmi agreed to these things, Anuradha would make another attempt at training and coaching Rajlaxmi, but if things were not better after 45 days, Rajlaxmi would be terminated. Anuradha then sent Rajlaxmi home for the rest of the day.

The three-day rule

I spoke with Anuradha about what I called my Three Day-Rule, which can be broken down into three options for the employee.

Option one: Rajlaxmi was going to be angry for three days. On the fourth day, she would do a "180-degree turn-around and improve." She might still be quiet due to the "sting" of the discussion, but Anuradha was to sit with her and do the necessary "clean-up work" of reestablishing a relationship and acknowledging the obvious signs Rajlaxmi was exhibiting.

Option two: Rajlaxmi was going to be angry and quit within the three-day time frame, quite possibly the next day. (By the way, when an employee leaves it is better than termination because the employer significantly reduces the litigation issue.)

Option three: Rajlaxmi was going to be angry for three days but return to work and pretend to improve but go "underground" and consciously or subconsciously sabotage herself and the organization, and create problems. In which case, we would monitor her behavior for these adverse actions, make notations in her file, and swiftly terminate her.

A variation

Another method that can often increase the likelihood of success and help the employee through this difficult time is to explain the three-day rule to the employee before he leaves the room. Go through each example. Then explain that if he chooses option three, this would quickly become obvious, and he would be terminated. It must be expressed at this point that the manager will do everything within her power to train, coach, and counsel the employee, and help him overcome any challenges. Psychologically, this short-circuits the process and puts the employee in a double-bind

situation once he realizes he is going through these steps, and that the manager knows what the employee is going to do before the employee does.

Termination is devastating for a department or organization due to the ripple effect. In essence, it can stir up concerns about job security among employees. Termination reverberates throughout an organization, and if some employees don't know the reasons behind why a certain employee was dismissed or quit, then all they understand is what they are told by the very efficient grapevine. Therefore, it's imperative to create an organization of trust and communication. Even though management cannot discuss the termination, if employees have built trust with management, and if communication channels are secure through regular dialogue, then the little bit of negative gossip should not hurt, and most employees will say, "What took you so long?"

Employees are very observant, and even though they may like someone, it doesn't mean they don't know that person is a slacker or causes friction in other ways. Often employees will have tried to coach their underperforming friends, telling them, "You better be careful how far you push Rita; you have already been written up two times in the last eight weeks." Therefore, counseling must be done with the full intent of helping the employee and the relationship improve.

In this instance, Rajlaxmi was angry for three days, and on day four when she returned, she spun 180 degrees and worked on becoming a model employee. Three years later she was still employed by Anuradha and the company.. This tactic saved Rajlaxmi's job, even though it was initially tough for her.

- Anuradha saved an employee who was able to accept counseling.
- Anuradha learned to face her fears of conflict sooner and address issues with more confidence.
- Each time Anuradha met conflicts, faced her fears, and addressed those issues quickly, she became a better manager. Also, Anuradha was able to retain more employees and reduce training costs.

After the three days

After the third day, the employee should be in a better spot and able to move in one of the three ways. Therefore, it is the manager's job to address this trust issue between days five and seven, after the initial punishment and including the three days of the three-day rule. The person must have time to acclimate, but not so long as to allow her to feel permanently ridiculed, which will erode trust.

Here's how you do it. Sit with the employee and explain that the conversation was tough for you as well as him. The manager must be sincere and communicate her desire to help the employee succeed. Encourage him to express his feelings or frustrations. This will lead to new issues that are problematic, such as, "Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" or "You didn't train me properly," or "I thought I was doing it the way you

wanted.” These must be addressed and worked through; they are real concerns and often true because most managers don’t address training and coaching issues soon enough, so poor habits are developed early on and become the norm. Thus, any criticism comes across as extreme, can often be taken personally, and cause finger-pointing back and forth. Be aware of these very real concerns.

The manager also must have the awareness and the strength of ego to accept the issues and express that, “Yes, I am learning how to become better at managing, just as you are becoming better at your job.” This leads to a dialogue about how the employee and manager can communicate sooner and more efficiently.

Back to the issue between Anuradha and Rajlaxmi. The symptom was Rajlaxmi’s poor performance, but the underlying problem was that Anuradha the manager didn’t address the issues soon enough due to fear of conflict. Unfortunately, by trying to avoid conflict, she made it more debilitating and cumbersome to deal with. The solution to this is proper counseling and addressing these issues sooner.

“The single biggest lesson I learned was when a hire isn’t working fine fire them fast. My biggest mistakes, and when I have seen the worst results, were when I gave someone too many chances, or let a situation drift on for too long because I couldn’t bring myself to terminate it.”
Cindy Gallop

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