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# Accountability

## Question:

"I've been in human resources for many years. Terminations have been hard for me. I wonder if you could discuss this issue in one of your columns. I feel a sense of failure when this is the outcome with any employee. Here's a recent example. We decided to terminate an employee with 11 years of service. The back-story is that as her department has restructured over the past few years, she'd been reluctant to embrace the changes. Her supervisor held a number of team building sessions during which the employee was a passive participant. Her work output was only minimally acceptable. She'd also become a difficult employee because she was moping and angry. Her co-workers complained about how they "worked around her" in order to get things done.

"Our company is emphasizing process improvement and cooperation. We are challenging people in new ways. Some of them don't like it. The old guard has the mindset that things weren't broken, so why are we trying to fix them? This employee represented that mindset. She'd even been a spokesperson of sorts for that mindset. Now, the story I'm hearing is that we fired her because she didn't tow the party line. That isn't true - we fired her because she wasn't doing her job and was apparently not interested in moving forward. The hard part is that she is a single mom and we'd had many private conversations in which she'd confided in me. I like her and feel for her. Long story short, I feel guilty. What do you say?"

## Answer:

Let me begin by observing that terminating an employee is never an easy or satisfying thing to do. I agree with your comment that there is a sense of failure attached to these outcomes. Why didn't the employee work out? What role did the employee play? The supervisor? The company? My personal view of things is that just as success results from a combination of variables, so does failure.

These are the kinds of things that you can reflect on as you probe into the context surrounding her exit from the company. My hunch is that the gossip grapevine you reference is buzzing with the story that management is out to get rid of veteran employees who don't do what they are told.

If I am correct with that hypothesis, telling a broader story about the performance expectations that are emerging is what you need to do. Tell your stakehold-

ers that you have a strategic game plan. Tell them that work units are going to be asked to band together via partnership and through interdependency to pursue innovation. Tell them that this will require individuals to use their problem solving, critical thinking, and decision making skills in more sophisticated fashion. Tell them that individual objectives will need to explicitly link and align with work goals so that organizational strategies are successfully pursued.

Then, importantly, involve them in the process of making it happen. Walk the talk and encourage them to do the same. Make it a habit to catch people doing something right and celebrate these little victories. Provide support and guidance for people who are feeling their way or are unclear or uncertain if they are up to what is required in this new mode of operation.

Frankly, this is where the role of manager as coach becomes very important. To what extent are you and the rest of the managerial team truly cultivating the talent in your midst? To what extent do you truly understand yourself and others? To what extent do you communicate effectively? To what extent is it a priority to develop your employees?

These are broader performance context issues that I encourage you to ponder, explore and confront as things evolve at your company.

Turning my attention to the specific issue of feeling guilty when an employee must be terminated, let me say that I do empathize with you. These are the toughest talks of all, there's no doubt about that. At the same time, let me observe that accountability is the core issue with which you are dealing.

In our consulting practice at ODC, we run into accountability issues all of the time. This is one of those charged terms that means different things to different people. Webster's tells us that accountability has to do with "being answerable for," "to offer a reckoning of" and so on.

My own definition is that when one is accountable, one fulfills his or her expectations. Promises are kept. Actions match words. It's pretty simple. I don't need you to hold me accountable, I hold myself accountable by being in the business of trying to be the best I can be each and every day. There's nothing magical or mysterious about this. I do my best each day and communicate in real-time fashion when I encounter roadblocks or obstacles. I try hard to make each day my masterpiece. By modeling that behavior, I set a nice example for others to follow.

In my experience, when companies push to a higher level, there is often a corresponding increase in the desire to hold the employees accountable. My sense is that this is probably what is going on in your situation. The bar is being raised. Higher outcomes have been targeted. The view has shifted forward. Better results are expected.

But this misses the mark in some ways, I believe. If the employees aren't holding themselves accountable, how is having a supervisor beat them over the head with a two-by-four going to work? No, from my vantage point, for loftier ends to be realized, your company must not only improve its productive capabilities, it must also improve its performance management capabilities. In short, I suggest that rather than feel sorry for employees who are under-performing, you and your colleagues need to unleash a program of positive accountability.

What do I mean by this? I mean an environment in which the expectation is that we follow through on our commitments. Implementing an integrated performance management process in which individual, team or work area, and organizational metrics are synthesized is the route to follow. Importantly, at the individual level, it is vital that the employee make personal

connections with the goals that are to be met and the criteria that will be used to gauge performance. This builds a foundation for accurate self-assessment, which just happens to be the key ingredient in cultivating peak performance at the individual level.

As Geoff Colvin has documented in his excellent book, "Talent is Overrated,"

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and as Malcolm Gladwell discussed in his most recent book "Outliers," peak performers are expert evaluators of their efforts. They scrutinize their performance and accurately identify what is working and what isn't. They verify these observations with feedback from others (e.g., coaches, teachers, managers, etc.) and then engage in disciplined, targeted practice to hone and refine their skills on an ongoing basis. With focus and attention, they seek further feedback and advance their performance further down the path toward excellence.

At the end of the day, my advice to you is as follows: "Stop feeling sorry for employees who under-perform. Do your best to engage with them and encourage them to see their performance accurately and objectively through development of self-assessment skills." This is the central issue.

When employees' self-assessment regularly corresponds with assessment by others, you will know you are on your way to building a peak performance culture. When you are confronted with the situation in which employees overrate their performance in relation to assessment by others, you will know there is still more work to do.

Ultimately, my message in this column is to start playing the performance management and assessment game at a higher level. When you do, you just might find that you won't be feeling sorry for the employees any more. You might just find that you will be feeling pride in what they are doing and the extent to which they are holding themselves accountable.

**Daniel A. Schroeder**, Ph.D. is a principal and co-founding partner of Brookfield-based Organization Development Consultants, Inc. ([www.OD-Consultants.com](http://www.OD-Consultants.com)). He can be reached at (262) 827-1901 or [Dan.Schroeder@OD-Consultants.com](mailto:Dan.Schroeder@OD-Consultants.com).