

MONSTER

How to Terminate an Employee without Breaking their Spirit

By: Dick Grote, author of *How to Be Good At Performance Appraisals: Simple, Effective, Done Right*

Writing up an employee's performance review may confirm your suspicion that the individual and the organization are so mismatched that employee termination is the right answer. Or, perhaps during the course of the year, a person's failure to respond sufficiently to your coaching, or his commission of an unacceptable offense, may cause the need to terminate.

Employee termination must be carefully planned, with the heavy involvement of human resources, if this assistance is available. But the responsibility for how to terminate an employee is the job of the manager and not that of the HR rep.



Get to the Point Quickly

To begin, waste no time with small talk or anything other than the job at hand. In the movie *Jerry Maguire*, Jerry's peer, a sleazy sports agent named Bob Sugar, takes him to lunch with the purpose of firing him. While he's portrayed in the

movie as a slimeball, Sugar does one thing right: he gets right to the point. He leads with a clear statement of the bad news he has to deliver: “I’m here to fire you, Jerry,” he states within a minute of their sitting down.

As HR expert Kris Dunn notes, when you’re delivering bad, life-changing news, clarity is your friend. The confusion related to small talk is your enemy.

Here’s a brief, step-by-step guide to one of leadership’s most unpleasant duties.

1. Say, “Hello, [*name*]. Come in and sit down. I’ve got some bad news for you.” (Note: Communications experts always advise that it’s important to set the appropriate tone for the meeting. By starting with the statement, “I’ve got some bad news” you have eliminated any confusion.)

2. State the reason for the termination in one short sentence: “As you know, [*the reason for the termination.*.]”

3. Say, “As a result, I need to let you know that your employment with the company has been terminated as of today.” (Note: Use the past tense. Say, “Your employment *has been* terminated,” not “*will be* terminated.”)

4. Be specific about what will happen next: pay, benefits, unused vacation time, references, outplacement, and so forth.

5. Close by thanking the person for his contributions to the company. (Note: While it may seem odd to thank someone you’re terminating for poor performance, almost everyone makes *some* contributions. Ending on a grace note can forestall future problems.)

Be fully prepared to deal with all of the questions that invariably arise at the time the termination is announced -- this is one time you won’t be able to say, “I’ll get back to you on that.” Make sure you have answers to questions like these *before* you initiate the termination:

- Is today my last day?
- When should I leave?
- Will I receive severance pay? How much?
- Will I receive the bonuses I was eligible for?
- When will I receive my last paycheck?
- Will I be paid for accumulated sick leave or vacation time not taken?

- Am I eligible for unemployment insurance?
- Will you or the company provide employment references? What will you say if you are asked to provide a reference?
- What will my coworkers and clients be told about my termination?
- Will my medical and insurance benefits continue?
- When must I return company property such as a car, cell phone, and keys?
- What happens to my pension, profit sharing, or savings plans?
- I'm driving a company car. How will I get home?
- Can I continue to use my office or work area to look for a job?
- When can I go back to my work area to get all my personal things?
- Can I say goodbye to everyone before I go?

The termination meeting should be brief -- ten to fifteen minutes is usually sufficient. People always want more. You can talk for hours to no benefit. If possible, schedule the termination early in the week so you don't give the person the weekend to brood about it.

In your discussion, don't attempt to justify or defend the decision. Stick to what you know for sure. You don't know, for example, that an employee who has failed a drug screen is a drug user or an addict. What you do know is that his drug screen was positive. Make sure the person has heard the termination news clearly, but avoid any personal attacks, accusations, or justifications ("You should have known . . ."). And certainly don't tell the employee that this is difficult for you. Your ex-employee would gladly change places.

Employee termination is undoubtedly one of the most disliked requirements of being a manager. But the termination of a marginal employee, if handled compassionately and maturely, will only generate relief from those who have had to put up with drones and deadwood, slackers and dedicated free-riders, without being able to take action. And remember — it's not the people you fire who make your life miserable. It's the ones you *don't*.

Author Bio

Dick Grote is President of Grote Consulting Corporation in Dallas, Texas. He is an expert in performance management and the author most recently of [*How to Be Good At Performance Appraisals: Simple, Effective, Done Right*](#), available at HBR.org and other retailers. He's also the author of *The Complete Guide To Performance Appraisal*, *The Performance Appraisal Question and Answer Book*, *Forced Ranking: Making Performance Management Work*, and *Discipline Without Punishment*.