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Firing Good Workers Who Are a Bad Fit

Employers Often Fumble for a Way to Say

'It's Not Working' – But Honesty Goes a Long Way

By PHRED DVORAK from THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, Page B5

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Valerie Frederickson, a human resources consultant in Silicon Valley, had a delicate problem: Her office administrator was smart and well-spoken, but after two months on the job, she didn't seem to like the work. "We needed to have her do things like data entry and clean the refrigerator, and she wanted to plan events for us," Ms. Frederickson says.

So Ms. Frederickson decided to let the administrator go – gently. She gave the woman a small amount of severance pay, helped her get a new job and assured her that the firing wasn't personal. "I told her, 'I like you a lot, and I think of you like a little sister, but I don't want you working here anymore,'" Ms. Frederickson recalls.

That humane approach to firing may seem like common sense. But human resources professionals say that figuring out how to handle employees who aren't fitting into the workplace is one of the trickiest tasks a manager can face.

Employers are well-schooled in how to eliminate jobs or fire poor performers. Yet they often don't know what to do with people who are doing their work passably, or even better, but aren't suited for the job, for reasons ranging from personal chemistry to mismatched skills.

In that gray area, employers often fumble, either keeping people on because they don't know what else to do, or seeking evidence of poor performance – even when that isn't the real issue. Badly handled firings can damage workplace morale, traumatize the employee and end up in court, says Maureen Clark, a human resources consultant in Menlo Park, Calif., who is asked often to investigate when things go wrong.

Employers need a graceful way to say, "It's not working; it's not your fault; let's figure out how to get you somewhere else," Ms. Clark says.

U.S. employers generally can fire employees not protected by a labor contract without a reason. In practice, however, courts often act to protect employees, faulting companies for firing longtime workers or those who have had good performance reviews. Judges also scrutinize disputed firings to ensure there was no race, gender or other discrimination, employment attorneys say.

At the same time, increasing job mobility and changing skill requirements are producing more personnel problems that "don't fit in the box," says Rhoma Young, a human resources consultant in Oakland, Calif.

In one case Ms. Young is investigating for a high-technology concern, the company shifted an engineer out of a programming position where he was doing well and into a job with more responsibility that required communication skills he lacked. The stress, combined with pressure from management, led the

engineer to take several months of disability leave, and eventually the situation cost him his job. Now, he is threatening to sue.

Employment attorneys and human resources consultants say companies can stay out of trouble by following some guidelines when thinking of firing a worker who doesn't fit in.

Managers should make sure they understand the problem – and be certain that the employee does, too. Sometimes bosses haven't properly explained what they want, or what the job requires, Ms. Young says.

Marlene Muraco, an attorney at labor-law specialist Littler Mendelson in San Jose, California, suggests considering options other than termination, such as training, a different post or another boss.

At Banco Popular North America, a unit of Puerto Rico's Popular Inc., human resources chief Jeannette Frett says managers are instructed to tell employees who aren't fitting in exactly where they aren't meeting expectations and to offer training to fix the problem before considering dismissal. That has been important, because jobs at the bank have changed a lot in the past few years, as Banco Popular has snapped up other lenders – along with their staff – and has pushed its bankers to market the bank's services more aggressively.

If an employee must be fired, be honest and nice, experts say. Ms. Frett says Banco Popular gives employees it is letting go as much notice as possible, and sometimes it offers outplacement counseling or severance pay. "They walk out with their dignity and respect," Ms. Frett says.

Ms. Clark, the human resources consultant, advises clients to specify in employee handbooks that the company will offer support to workers who are fired because they don't fit in.

One of those clients, the chief executive of public relations firm McGrath/Power in Silicon Valley, used the clause a few years ago when he fired a new account executive. Jonathan Bloom says the executive wasn't as experienced as he had hoped, and he felt that she was disturbing other employees by gossiping a lot. The company gave her a small severance payment and agreed with her about how to describe the dismissal.

"The more honest you are, the smoother the process tends to go," Mr. Bloom says.

Managers should remember that employees who aren't fitting in well are often unhappy themselves and may agree that they would be better off elsewhere, says Ms. Frederickson, the recruiter who fired her office administrator. "You want them to admit it is a bad fit and get out of there," she says.

Ms. Frederickson should know: She was fired years ago from a human resources firm, largely because she didn't get along with her boss. She started her own firm later and competes with her former employer.

Write to Phred Dvorak at phred.dvorak@wsj.com

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