

A Letter to My Ex-Employee

Dear Employee I Had to Fire Yesterday:

First of all, I'm sorry it became necessary. Really. Many firings are "for cause" (committing a firing offense) but yours wasn't, and I know it is causing you and your family some distress.

I hope that what I'm about to tell you will help you in your next job. If I had explained this earlier, you might still be working for me, and a different ex-employee might be reading this letter.

Firing people under any circumstances is unpleasant for any employer. Hiring new workers is time consuming (and expensive) if done correctly, so it's no surprise that substandard workers often remain employed.

Yes, you were a substandard worker. I told you so on your last performance review. Not bad enough to fire outright (normally), but marginally worse than everyone else.

In a booming economy when corporations have little trouble turning a profit, having a few laggards on the payroll is not a huge problem – a business can afford to support some dead weight.

In tougher times – like now – that is not the case. When everything conceivable is being done to increase sales and profits – and the company is still not profitable or sufficiently profitable – the only other place to look is expenses. Wages are by far the largest expense, and sometimes businesses need to "fire their way to profitability."

Let's visit for a minute about how business owners tend to view employees. If you have never owned a business, you probably don't have a feel for it.

In a nutshell, the most valuable employees tend to be the ones that act and react as if they own the business themselves. It's as simple as that.

At the other extreme, in almost every business there are employees that just need to be fired. The either have bad attitudes, poor work ethics, low motivation, poor skills, or a combination of those deficiencies.

If you believe (as I do) that in almost every corporation at least 5% of the employees fit this profile, the math works out to two people in a business our size. Few employees ever think that their names are at the top of the list of people who are “on the bubble.” Surely there must be at least two people employed here who are worse! Well, two of you are wrong.

You are far more likely to be one of the two at risk if you’re not coming to work with the attitude that what you do today determines whether or not you have earned the right to come back to do it again tomorrow. I like you well enough personally, but I’m not running a social service here. I don’t owe you a job any more than our customers owe us an order – we need to prove every day that we deserve it.

In a business that strives for excellence, the mediocre stand out. To be blunt, you are toxic. You are a terrorist within our own organization, sabotaging much of what the rest of us are trying to accomplish. We have to deal with your mistakes, your lack of productivity and your bad disposition. You are sucking the life out of us. Firing you is like giving the rest of us a raise.

It doesn’t matter what position you are in. Drivers who dawdle or misdeliver, salespeople who can’t (or don’t) sell, customer service people who seem uncaring or don’t follow through, managers without enough to do, or anyone constantly in a bad mood will always be at risk. In retrospect, you probably should be grateful that you lasted here as long as you did.

I honestly wish you well in the future. I hope something in this letter resonates with you and makes a difference in how you apply yourself with your next employer. I know he or she will appreciate it.

Sincerely,

The Guy Who Had to Fire You Yesterday

Writers Group Member Dave Parsons co-owns a business on the Coralville Strip where he continuously hopes for mentally stable ex-employees and stricter gun control laws.