

The Truth Will Set You Free (And The Other Person, Too)

By
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I was listening to a call-in legal advice program recently. The caller's husband had been fired after 23 years of service. Not only was this individual let go, but he didn't find out he was out of his job until he failed to receive a paycheck! One can only wonder what in the world would have kept that employer from telling this man the truth—not on pay day but long, long, long before that.

As an Executive Coach, corporate clients often ask me to work with an employee on his or her professional development. That can be an exciting prospect or it can end in disaster. It all depends on what the employer has told that individual before the coaching relationship begins. In my world, there are two kinds of coaching clients—those that are internally driven, highly motivated to achieve and open to constructive feedback and those that need to be fixed. Employees that need to be fixed are not good candidates for coaching and probably were not good candidates for employment in the first place. If you have someone on your staff that needs to be fixed, maybe the truth would be the agent of change you are really looking for.

Where do these problems start? Employees that need to be fixed are generally a mismatch for the organization. So to answer the question about where the problem starts, it starts before the hire, often moving rapidly down hill from there. Not every employee that needs to be fixed is a hopeless case, however. That's where telling the truth can set you and the other person free—free to take responsibility for change or free to move on.

The truth hurts, so the saying goes. I think that's because many people don't know how to tell the truth. In fact, the "hurt" factor may be truth's biggest deterrent. No one wants to be the bad guy. Here are a few ideas for harnessing truth as a change agent for your organization.

- First, be honest with yourself about the individual you want to hire. Create a solid job description that builds in real, measurable goals. Use that description in your recruiting and interviewing process. It's tempting to paint a rosy picture of a job that has a downside, but some people might be really excited by the challenge of a tough job. Better to tell the truth. The same goes for the company environment, dress, grooming, wardrobe and standards for behavior. You might be surprised at how many six-figure professionals are completely out of synch with their employer on those issues and how far their employers will go to avoid telling those individuals the truth about their appearance. If you are on the other side of a job search, be honest with yourself about what you want and what you are willing to do including what personal changes you will have to make to be a part of the team. Take yourself out of the running for a job that is obviously not right for you for whatever reason. You'll resent every day on a job that is not a good fit.

- Second, start conversations early into the new hire's life with the firm. Point out what's right and what you would like more of. Be positive. If it looks like there's no hope, position your conversations to help that individual exit gracefully.
- Third, trust your instincts. Don't argue yourself into or out of a decision that compromises your gut. You'll be sorry. You know you will.
- Fourth, use regular dialogue to coach performance and nip problems early. Changes in behavior can signal deeper problems. This is the time when the truth can be your greatest ally, so don't duck the issue.
- Lastly, don't wait twenty-three years to tell someone that they aren't working out. Avoiding the truth makes you both prisoners. And besides, that's just cruel.

What does all this have to do with business development, you may be asking? When people issues are handled early, you will have more bandwidth for what is most important to the growth of your enterprise. And that's the truth.

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