

# The Valued Troublesome Employee

## To Terminate or Not to Terminate

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**I'm sure it comes as no surprise that finding skilled people to work in your manufacturing facility is no simple task.** But after finding them, and investing in the development of their abilities, what happens when one of them — an employee your company really needs — becomes a troublesome employee? This is among the trickiest situations a manager can face.

Early in my career, I was faced with this challenge. When I first became a supervisor at Indiana Gear Works, one of the people reporting to me was Max, the lead man for the department. Max was very talented at setting up the machines. In fact, he was the best we had...and he knew it. But there was a problem with Max. He was a troublesome employee. He was disruptive, disregarded work rules, showed no respect for management, and was a prime example of someone with a caustic bad attitude. He expressed his belligerent attitude for the workplace by frequently being late for work, taking extra time for lunch, and periodically he was even insubordinate. Any suggestion to Max that he was out of line was met with a look that conveyed, "Yeah, what are you gonna do about it?"

I learned that the previous supervisor had been reluctant to confront Max about his bad attitude because of his technical competency. And this led to another deeper problem: the other workers in the department saw how Max was able to get away with ignoring work rules, and more than a few had picked up bad behavior as well.

After a couple of days of this, my impulse was to march over to Max's work station and point to the door. But then again, what would happen to our productivity if our best lead man was shown the door? This really felt like a no-win scenario.

First of all, terminating any employee should never be taken lightly. And it is essential that you as a manager attempt

to get to the heart of the matter and work through a carefully thought-out resolution strategy that takes emotion out of the formula.

A good first step is to ask yourself some questions:

- How much harm is the individual causing to the work environment?
- How difficult will it be to replace his or her expertise?
- Is the person genuinely trying to do a good job but his or her communication style is the problem?
- What is the likelihood of an intervention resolving the problem?

Most companies have disciplinary procedures in place, so I won't take the time to address policies, labor law, or best practices. However, here are a few ideas about how to systematically work through the problem.

The first step should include informal, friendly, and positive conversations with the individual. This process can provide some valuable insights as you size up the problem. Next, a private conversation with the individual that is still friendly, but direct, is a good step. Here you can explain the detrimental effects of their actions and what work rules have been violated and ask them for their assistance in resolving the problem.

Here is a potential approach for this conversation.

*Bob, you are a valued employee and you have a great talent. We definitely need you and want you here. But the fact that you're not following the work rules is causing some problems. First, your behavior is negatively affecting the attitudes of the other workers, and this is bad for the company. And by not following the rules, you're putting me in a bad position. You see, the company's management is expecting me to do my job and ensure that all work rules are followed. If I don't take action about your behavior, I'm not doing my job. If things keep going as they are, you'll*

*be giving me no other option than to administer the company's disciplinary procedures. So, it's really up to you, and I'm asking for you to help me and for you to do the right thing for the company.*

If the employee's behavior shows no improvement, consider these next steps.

First, recruit someone in management who may have a good relationship with the person to talk to them about the problem. Also, a talk with your HR manager should be included.

So now you're thinking, "Come on Joe, how long do I have to tip-toe around this person?"

These friendly conversations are important initial steps to see if you can easily resolve the problem. Remember that your company really does need this person's contributions. But by this time, if your efforts have yielded no improvement, it's time to dial things up.

The next step now is the verbal warning — where the issues are clearly delineated. And make sure they know that this is an official verbal warning. The employee should also be informed of what is to follow if improvement does not take place. Be sure that a written note of this conversation is placed in their HR file.

If there is no improvement, then it's time for a formal written warning. You should ask the person to sign this, but it is not uncommon for someone to refuse to sign. If this is the case, make a note as such in their HR file.

If there is still no improvement, it's time for a three-day disciplinary lay off. And of course the last step is termination. But if termination is the outcome, this should come as absolutely no surprise to the person.

Again, one must look at the negative effects this person is having on the work environment. If this negative behavior outweighs the positive value of the individual's contributions, losing them may

have a short term negative impact on your productivity, but you will most likely be better off in the long term.

But now back to the story about Max.

Being a new supervisor, I felt caught between a rock and a hard place. At first, I let the situation ride for a while, but eventually it became clear to me after discussions with my manager and HR that Max had to go. Finally when the deed was done, and Max was terminated, I thought those in management would welcome the fact that I had taken care of the dirty work. But on the very next day, the plant manager stopped me and said, "I hope you're not going to be sorry. Max was the only one who could set up the most difficult jobs and he had the highest efficiency in the department." Yes, I hoped I had not made a serious mistake.

Then an interesting thing happened. With Max gone, another operator named Dale asked for the opportunity to set up several of Max's difficult jobs. "Of course," I said, having nothing to lose. Wouldn't you know, after a couple of days, Dale was setting up the jobs as fast as Max. When I asked Dale about why he had not taken this initiative before, he said, "Max didn't want anyone setting up his jobs."

After Max's departure, there were other changes as well. I found that everyone was at their work stations even before the start of their shift and right after lunch. At first, there was a decline in the department's output, but in a short period of time, the department efficiency increased and started to surpass previous records.

This reminded me of what I had observed when I was in the military when I saw first hand the Army's no-nonsense approach to discipline. The Army's methods of discipline not only served as a swift way to bring an individual in line with the rules, but also showed others that the rules were to be taken seriously and rigorously adhered to. I'm certainly not suggesting managers should run their companies like an iron-fisted drill sergeant, but keep in mind the value of having others see the importance of the rules and your commitment to making sure they are followed.

But that's not the end of Max's story.

Max called me three weeks after his termination and said that after giving it some careful thought, he figured he had actually been at fault because he thought management would never let him go. So, with a "Last Chance Agreement" I had

Max's employment reinstated. And while Max was never going to win a departmental award for congeniality, he did correct his errant ways and became a valued contributor to the department for many years.

I learned from this that there is nothing wrong with offering a person their job back after some time has passed. However, the ex-employee must know that their behavior must change if they elect to return. It has been proven, more often than not, if the person returns to work for one last chance, their attitude and behavior will indeed improve. Losing your job, especially if it was your fault, is one of the most stressful things a person can go through. In the case of Max, it was just what was needed for the message to get through.

Finally, it comes down to this. We may not always like the people we work with or have complete harmony, but it is essential that people work together and managers strive to promote a civil environment. This has long-reaching benefits for making your company productive and for being a positive place for people to work. 



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