

Ardent

Search Company

Consultants for Leadership Selection

There's A Fine Line ... **between being soft-hearted and soft-headed** By Bruce Dingman

Letting someone go can be something to be resisted. But not doing it when needed can be worse. It's not good for the employee or organization to maintain the status quo if the needed results aren't happening. Sometimes the corrective action may be a realignment of people or duties and in other circumstances a new person is needed. But in either case, if handled thoughtfully, the change may be far less painful than feared.

We've often been called when a major change was needed. Maybe you can relate to one of these.

Looked good but results didn't happen: One organization had a vice president of sales and marketing who loved wining and dining customers but suffered from "he who goes round in circles shall be called big wheel." Not only were the sales objectives not being met, but despite good relationships with customers, he showed arrogance with internal staff that created disharmony. There was no saving the person's job and a new vice president had to be hired.

The "Peter Principle": In another case, a controller was really good with numbers but lacked the big picture perspective needed to be helpful to the CEO, plus he lacked a consultative approach in working with department managers, showing them how to better manage the financial aspects of their responsibilities. A new controller was hired and was so effective that within six months, the job was expanded and the position enlarged to chief financial officer.

Complement the existing leader: A medium-sized, family-owned company had seen a decline in sales and a loss of profitability. The board (all family members) came to recognize that their allegiance to their family by practicing an "only promote from within" policy had left the company without the professionalism and leadership needed to stay competitive. The president lacked the ability to take the company where it needed to go. We did a search that teamed him with a chief operating officer who had the needed expertise to turn the company around.

Lack of strategic thinking: Another client had a president who was terrific in operations but lacked strength in strategic planning. So, not wanting to lose the president's strengths, they had us find a board chairman who could provide the needed strength in strategic areas, give direction and guidance for the board and work with the existing president.

Glad they got fired: How a termination is handled can make all the difference. I once had a supervisor working for me who needed to fire someone he had recently hired who could not handle the multi-tasking requirements of the job. I encouraged the supervisor to let the employee know she was a good person but just not gifted for this particular job. We wanted to leave self-worth in tact, if possible. The next week she called back and thanked him, for she had found a new job that was much more suitable and she was happier in her work. Such cases are seldom that positive but the intent of treating the person as graciously as possible is worth pursuing. Even if the recipient does not react as positively, you'll know you did the right thing.

When is a change needed?

To know if a change is needed, first conduct an objective analysis of what the organization needs.

Sometimes unrealistic goals with difficult market conditions mean no one could be successful. Conduct a market study, perhaps through an outside consultant specializing in such market studies, to show the organization in comparison to its peer group. If business is down 10% but the industry is down 15% then the results may be good despite appearances.

If the management team is not unified, motivated and professional, maybe a management team audit, team building or strategic planning consultant is needed to achieve the needed results.

On the other hand, sometimes the leader just doesn't have people skills, visionary abilities or salesmanship to be successful. Maybe times have changed and the leader hasn't. Once a pragmatic analysis shows what changes are needed, the leader can then be given the right support to become successful. Success will rest on how the leader reacts to three questions: Does the leader acknowledge the need for change? Will the leader react positively to effecting such change? Can the leader make the change happen?

Unfortunately a leader may lack the desire to keep learning and changing. For example, if an executive has resisted using computers, that's probably systematic that the person will not grasp other changes. Is the person resistant to constructive criticism? Such an attitude may have an underlying problem of personal insecurity or rigidity. Is a leader needed who will make sales calls on major customers however, the present employee is too introverted and the calls don't take place? Whatever problems the person needs to overcome, there is a possible solution.

Perhaps a "wakeup call" will motivate an employee? If the superior says, "in order for us to reach our objectives, you need to personally do such and such," maybe the person will now follow through. It might require the superior to put the person on a short leash ("I'll need weekly reports on what you are doing in this area.") The superior should ask the person to commit to the new strategy and to maintain a positive attitude. Failing that response, a separation should be discussed.

Termination can be a very distasteful thing to contemplate. But the reality is that the stakeholders (including staff and customers) deserve a leader who can provide the leadership needed for the organization to reach its objectives. To avoid or delay changing a leader when one is needed is a dereliction of the supervisor's fiduciary responsibility. So...if it has to be done how can it be best handled?

Oftentimes a failing leader was successful in earlier situations, is strong in numerous areas, is a good person, etc, but still the required results aren't achieved. The person and the job are not a fit. If at all possible, a person should be released while keeping self-worth intact, treating them right financially and making the separation as gracious as possible.

If you would value some guidance on how to best handle such a situation, a useful resource might be an executive recruiter, a human resource consultant or an attorney with significant experience in such matters.