

What Would Donald Trump Do?

A majority of business owners admit they're scared to fire employees -- even incompetent ones. How to find the courage to say, "You're fired."

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Forget Donald Trump.

"You're fired" isn't a phrase that rolls off Ed Cook's tongue. The owner of a Stone Mountain, Ga., State Farm agency, Cook recently became concerned about an employee who spent far too much time chatting on her cell phone at the office. The last straw was an hour-long personal call she made while he was out on business. When he confronted her and she shrugged it off, Cook decided -- then and there -- to let her go. In his 30 years at the agency, that was only the sixth time he had ever [fired anyone](#).

"It kills me to have to fire an employee," Cook says. "I lose sleep over it. But when I'm paying someone to work, I expect them to work."

While television bosses -- from Trump, to Montgomery Burns on *The Simpsons*, to Michael Scott on *The Office* -- gleefully terminate employees with abandon, real-world employers are far more hesitant.

In a recent national survey, 61 percent of small-business owners said they find it hard to [fire employees](#) -- even bad ones, according to SurePayroll, a Chicago-based small-business payroll firm.

"The survey confirms our belief that small-business owners struggle with many HR issues and would prefer to focus instead on growing their businesses," says SurePayroll president Michael Alter. "Firing employees is particularly difficult."

That's why as many as 78 percent of business owners said they prefer to put it off as long as possible, the survey found.

[Francisco Dao](#), the founder of StrategyandPerformance.com, a San Francisco-based executive coaching and consulting firm, remembers working at a financial firm alongside a full-blown alcoholic.

"He would disappear for hours, even days," says Dao, an Inc.com columnist. "All I could think was, 'What is this guy still doing here?'"

Still, you don't have to show up drunk to be on thin ice in the workplace. The reasons for firing an employee range from poor [performance](#) -- cited by 66 percent of the survey's respondents -- to attitude problems, inadequate skills, and poor attendance.

That said, the reasons for keeping bad employees are equally broad. Topping the list is the inherent gamble involved in finding a replacement, particularly amid an increasingly tight labor market. Other reasons include everything from allowing time for an employee to improve, to a fear of lawsuits, personal reprisals, and sagging workplace morale.

With all that hanging in the balance, it's no wonder a majority of business owners prefer the slow pain of keeping an unproductive worker on the company payroll, than the sudden, potentially sharper pain of taking them off.

"Think of it like someone who would rather suffer with a dull toothache than go to the dentist and face the drill," Dao says.

Beyond merely avoiding pain, Dao says, from an evolutionary standpoint, we may actually be "hard wired" to dislike firing people, which he says is akin to killing a member of your own tribe -- taking his cue from *Survivor*, rather than *The Apprentice*.

Surprisingly, more than half of the employers surveyed said they had no formal termination process in place. Without one, Alter says, things can appear to be arbitrary and ambiguous -- with terminated employees feeling they've been unfairly treated, or the rest of your staff saddled with a poor performer who should've gotten the ax long ago.

Whatever the cause, there is no good reason to avoid firing an employee if you really don't think he or she can improve. Alter says employers should act quickly when there's an obvious problem. "My advice to business owners is that they need to be slow to hire and quick to fire," he says. "Don't procrastinate terminating an employee."

Yet, they must also avoid developing a reputation for being too quick to fire, which in turn leads to charges of [disloyalty from staff](#), or worse, callousness.

"The real balance is between how much you as an employer are willing to work to augment an employee's abilities, or just let them go and start fresh with someone else," Dao says. An employee who isn't achieving results, but is nevertheless genuinely engaged in the goals of the business, is worth keeping around, he adds.

"You have to look at an employee and gauge what their strengths and weaknesses are, but if they're not concerned with your business goals -- it's very difficult to change that," Dao says. "It's a deal breaker."

Dao says employers should divide misdemeanor offenses -- like missing a deadline now and then, or accidentally revealing your entire client list in an e-mail -- from those that are indicative of root problems that aren't going away.

Throughout, they should also let every employee know what's expected of them and be very clear when they're not meeting those expectations.

Keeping detailed reports about an employee's performance, along with regular feedback, will also take some of the guilt away from letting a bad worker go.

Recently, Cook reconciled with an employee he fired years ago and had felt terrible about ever since. The employee had just returned from an eight-week maternity leave and was constantly showing up late for work. Cook, who was fighting a throat infection at the time, was in a bad mood the day he let her go.

"We both admitted we didn't handle it very well and should've done things differently," Cook says.
"I think we both realized it was a rotten situation, for me and for her."

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