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Bob Woolverton (bobwoolverton@gmail.com; linkedin.com/in/bobwoolverton) owns Top Tier Leadership Training in Seattle, Washington, USA.

Fired prevention

By Bob Woolverton

Many years ago, I was sitting in a staff meeting to have a detailed discussion about the behavior of a recently terminated employee. In this organization, a "staff meeting" included everyone from first-level supervisors all the way up the organizational chart—including the CEO. It was the CEO who made the final decision that termination was the appropriate disciplinary action. The meeting occurred so many years ago that I don't remember the behavior that caused the termination. But there was one thing that happened during the meeting that is so clear in my memory that it's as though it happened yesterday.

Immediately following the CEO's summary of events and the termination decision, a first-level supervisor leaned back in his chair with his arms folded across his chest. With an attitude of arrogance and a sense of defiant satisfaction, he proudly exclaimed, "I saw that coming!" I was shocked. I remember looking at that supervisor and thinking, "How can you watch a coworker walk off a cliff and do absolutely nothing to intervene?"

As a leader or influencer in your workplace, wouldn't you want to be the hero in this story? Wouldn't you want to recognize the red-flag warnings and take some action to prevent the coworker from walking off the cliff? You absolutely can be the hero. There are multiple indicators (red flags) forewarning career-ending behaviors. You need to know what they are and how to recognize them in the workplace to prevent a coworker from getting fired. Armed with the ability to recognize red flag warnings, you can be the hero in this story.

Good apple spoiled by rotten barrel?

Getting back to our original story, your first reaction may be to identify the first-level supervisor as the antagonist in this story. But what lies beneath the surface are numerous contributors that created a shift in organizational culture. An organization's culture can go awry in many ways, but it usually leads to an environment where a good apple spoils in a rotten barrel. The terminated employee was once a good apple, as was the first-level supervisor. It was the organizational barrel that, over time, influenced them into behaviors (or lack of behaviors) they would never have considered absent the influence of the workplace barrel—i.e., the organizational culture. How and why does this occur in the workplace? How does an organization's culture go so awry that people engage in behaviors they would never have considered otherwise?

The answer is multifaceted. Like the example above, many organizations fire the employee, thinking employee termination has eliminated their problem. But what if the actual problem is systemic? What if the problem is hidden within a system or process? What if the real problem resides in the organization's culture? If so, firing the employee is only a temporary solution, and the problem will likely resurface. Often, we assume the bad apple had malicious intent, but malicious intent is not what causes a good apple to spoil. Let's examine how employees make decisions in the workplace.

Decision-making and cognitive development

Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987) was an American psychologist best known for his work on stages of moral development. His work suggests we make decisions based upon our level of maturity (i.e., development), ranging from the lowest level, where we only consider "what's in it for me," to the highest level of moral maturity, where decisions are based on what serves the greatest good according to universal principals such as justice, equality, and human dignity.[1]

All of us can find examples of Kohlberg's theories within our own lives. When we examine how we make workplace decisions today versus how we made similar decisions 15, 20, or 30 years ago, we can all find instances where we can say to ourselves: "I wish I knew then what I know now." Knowing what you know now would have caused you to do something completely different back then. Or, looking back, you can't believe the decision you made. That's an example of Kohlberg's theory. As we mature, we gain more institutional knowledge coupled with our internal compass changing focus from self-focused drivers to more altruistic big-picture outcomes. However, as a leader, or an influencer in an organization, there is a critical component to understand regarding how newer employees find their way within our organizations.

Our newer employees have completed our onboarding process—they've read the policy and procedures manual and our rules and regulations, and now they're ready to be productive contributors. And as they begin assimilating, they have an intrinsic need to fit in, get along with their coworkers, and be productive. These needs are consistent with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory about belongingness.[2] To figure out how to fulfill these needs, employees will look upward in the organizational chart, as well as look to their coworkers (horizontally in the organizational chart) for clues on how they should behave to fulfill these needs of belonging. The cues from these two sources will have a more profound influence on the employee's workplace behavior than the influence of the policy and procedures manual.

Suppose your company's values statement contains guiding principles like honesty, integrity, trust, and respect. But workplace behaviors promote "profits" above all else. Those behaviors will be seen as operational clues as to what the organization truly prioritizes and what the new employee needs to do to fulfill the needs of fitting in, getting along, and being productive.

Case in point, the Ford Pinto in the early 1970s had a design flaw. In low-speed, rear-end collisions, the gas tank would rupture, bursting into flames, often causing the occupants trapped inside to burn to death. Ford engineers designed a retrofit solution that would cost $11 per vehicle. However, the culture of the Ford Motor Company at the time had a tenacious focus on profitability emanating from the CEO. The recall coordinator performed a cost-benefit analysis and determined it was cheaper not to perform the recall and allow the flaw to remain uncorrected, which allowed more people to burn to death. And indeed, more Ford Pinto occupants did burn to death in low-speed, rear-end collisions.[3]

In this case, Ford prioritized profits over human life. Decades later, in hindsight, the person responsible for the recall decision cannot believe he allowed the organizational culture (the organizational barrel) to cause him to make such a decision. Before joining Ford, he considered himself a social activist whose morals could withstand any challenge. "At work, managers and the organizational culture transmit many cues about how employees should think and act."[4] This is an example of how influential organizational culture can be and how a good apple can spoil in a rotten barrel. Next, let's look at an example of younger employees looking up in the organization and looking around themselves for clues on what's acceptable workplace conduct.

In 2019, a Florida police officer (Officer A) had a reputation for being very proactive about getting drugs and guns off the streets in his jurisdiction. However, Officer A had rationalized in his mind that the ends justify the means,

and to get the guns and drugs off the streets, he was conducting illegal strip searches that were not only civil rights violations but also violations of both state law and department policy. There were many other red-flag warnings about this officer's work product that were overlooked or not recognized by his supervisors. Still, those red flags are too numerous and industry-specific to go into detail here. However, the critical point is that during the internal investigation, it was learned that a younger officer (Officer B) had witnessed Officer A conduct these prohibited searches on at least four previous occasions. And because he had seen Officer A engage in these types of searches multiple times, Officer B thought that behavior must be okay. This is an example of how employees—especially newer employees—are always looking up and around themselves for clues on acceptable behaviors that fit within the organization's culture.[5] This brings us to the next topic of how an organization's culture can veer off course.

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