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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.

Behaviors that are accepted, then repeated, become your organizational culture

It is human nature to want to avoid interpersonal conflict. Therefore, when an employee engages in a minor indiscretion, supervisors and managers may prefer to avoid the potential interpersonal conflict of having a behavior-correcting discussion with the employee. The supervisor rationalizes that the employee's indiscretion is minor compared to the potential interpersonal conflict. The employee's behavior may fall into the category of "just because you can, doesn't mean you should." Or it may be a less-than-optimal decision the employee made due to their lack of experience. Initiating these behavior-correcting conversations is crucial for a supervisor or manager for two reasons. The first is because, at this stage, the conversation may be a minor corrective or coaching opportunity, just "a little rudder tap" to get the employee back on track. Secondly, behaviors that are not corrected become accepted behaviors through benign neglect. Once those accepted behaviors are repeated, they become your new culture. It is essential for supervisors and managers to have those crucial conversations, while the deviation only requires a minor "rudder tap" to get back on track. Otherwise, the organizational culture may drift off course, and your next conversation may be your response to managing a crisis.

Equity theory

On a subconscious level, employees are constantly engaged in the form of cognitive calculus. They are continually comparing their work efforts and rewards to the efforts and rewards of their "comparison other." Most often, the comparison other is a coworker who has either the same job title or someone who has similar responsibilities. Cognitive calculus is always looking for equal treatment in the workplace. When inequity is perceived, the employee will attempt to restore equity. There are many types of perceived inequity (i.e., favoritism, special rewards, attention, and amount of work produced), and the methods utilized by an employee to restore equity can vary widely. They may approach the supervisor to correct the inequity, they may go to the union, or they may withhold work effort. For example, if an employee feels they work harder than anyone else, yet their comparison other doesn't work as hard but receives the same pay and recognition, a common method to restore equity is to increase their absenteeism through increased use of sick leave.[6] The employee convinces themselves that sick leave benefits are owed to them because of their unappreciated extra effort and may become the path they choose to restore equity. Therefore, the supervisor needs to recognize the effects and symptoms of equity theory in the workplace and prevent them from occurring. Additionally, if the perceived inequity is dramatic, an employee may turn to theft or embezzlement to restore equity.

If employees observe managers and executives taking advantage of special treatment, benefits, or advantages—particularly behaviors that may be ethically questionable—the employee may also engage in questionable behaviors. As an extreme example of executive privilege, in 1977, former President Richard Nixon was interviewed by David Frost. Frost asked Nixon if the president could do something illegal in certain situations if it were in the country's best interest. Nixon replied, "Well when the president does it, that means that it is not illegal."[7] Nixon considered his positional authority to be above the law. Do you have executives or managers in your organization who act like the rules don't apply to them?

If you do, employees may begin to engage in questionable behaviors or garner special benefits for themselves because they believe (rightly or wrongly) that it's the culture of the organization (looking up and around for clues). Or, they know it's wrong, but if the boss can do it, then to restore equity, the employee may also do it (or some other bad behavior). It is vital that everyone in the organizational chart behaves consistently with the organization's values statement. Otherwise, employees may engage in career-ending behaviors because they think it's expected or that their behavior is justified because they've been treated unfairly.[8]

I'm 50% of all my failed relationships

When someone gets promoted, their mindset often adopts a philosophy of "I'm in charge." But instead, they should have a mindset of "I'm responsible for . . ." They're responsible for the outcomes of their team/division/company (depending on where they reside on the organizational chart). They're responsible for facilitating the success of the people of their team/division/company. And they're responsible for safeguarding the welfare of the people of their team/division/company.

If you have an employee who got fired for misconduct, aren't you 50% of that relationship? In response to employee misconduct, the first thought of any leader should be: What could I have done, or what should I have done to prevent this situation from occurring? What is my culpability in this failed relationship? Was the policy or procedure communicated clearly? Did I ensure a thorough understanding by the employee of the policy's intent? Did I leave any gaps allowing for misinterpretation in this case? As the leader, you should be thinking to yourself; obviously, the policy/procedure did not result in the outcome I expected. Why not? Absent specific malicious intent by the employee, I am 50% of this failed relationship. What am I going to do to prevent this from occurring again?

Fired prevention

When discussing preventing career-ending behaviors in the workplace, I frequently encounter resistance to the idea and hear responses like, "We have millions of interactions a year, and the few times we experience a crisis are statistically insignificant." (Some of the crises I discuss in class resulted in someone losing their life, and the idea that a manager or executive would think of a loss of life as statistically insignificant is very troubling to me.)

The commercial aviation industry could say the same thing. They transport hundreds of millions of passengers each year, and the number of commercial airline crashes is very small. They could say the number of crashes compared to the millions of passengers served are statistically insignificant—but they don't! Any airline crash is thoroughly examined to determine causation and prevent a recurrence—industry-wide.

All industries have crises, often resulting from a good apple spoiling in a rotten barrel. Therefore, all companies should initiate prevention measures by using examples of previous crises in their industries and discuss collaboratively with all employees how to prevent a similar crisis within their organizations. "The best programs work through debate, dialogue, case studies, self-evaluation, and problem-solving."[9] These collaborative efforts ensure that all employees understand the big picture and what's expected of them in a similar circumstance, and it helps develop their moral maturity. Additionally, these discussions are a two-way street. They create a feedback loop where employees who do the work daily can identify red-flag warnings or deficiencies within workplace systems and processes that management may be unaware of.

Without these types of discussions, executives and managers may "assume" an employee's responsive behavior to different scenarios will be the same responsive decisions they would make if they were present. This 'assumption' is the kiss of death. Remember our discussion earlier about Kohlberg's theory of cognitive moral development? You cannot assume an employee's behavior will be the same as yours; you must be proactive and be certain you have prepared your employees. These collaborative discussions are like having a fire drill. Everyone is ready for that low-frequency, high-risk event. They know what to do, who and where to report to, and are confident that everyone's responsive behavior will be consistent with organizational goals and values. That is your part of being responsible for ensuring their success and safeguarding their welfare.

Takeaways

- Recognize red flags of how organizational culture gets off-course: (1) avoiding "rudder-tap" conversations, (2) accepting behaviors that get repeated become your culture, and (3) assuming all employees share the same level of cognitive moral development.
- Understand that organizational culture is a more powerful influence than the policy manual.
- Recognize equity theory in the workplace, i.e., how employees perceive and restore equity.
- Remember, you're 50% of all your failed relationships. What is your culpability? What could you have done, or what should you have done to prevent this crisis from occurring?
- Be proactive about crisis prevention and never have to say, "You're fired!"

1 Craig E. Johnson, *Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow*, 4th Ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012), 241.
2 Chuck Williams, *MGMT3,* (Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage Learning, 2011), 238.
3 Linda K. Trevino and Katherine A. Nelson, *Managing Business Ethics: Straight Talk about How to Do It Right*, 7th Ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2017) Kindle Edition, 64.
4 . Trevino and Nelson, *Managing Business Ethics*, 15.
5 Real World Police, "*Bodybuilder Cop | The Termination of Rock Contardi*," YouTube, September 22, 2021, Public Records Disclosure, 16:50 to 1:00:49, https://youtu.be/kh5Tsm8mtXU.
6 Williams, *MGMT3*, 240.
7 Landmark Cases of the U.S. Supreme Court, "Nixon's Views on Presidential Power: Excerpts from a 1977 Interview with David Frost," Street Law Inc., accessed December 12, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20190417202919/http:/landmarkcases.org/united-states-v-nixon/nixons-views-on-presidential-power.
8 Trevino and Nelson, *Managing Business Ethics*, 25.
9 Johnson, *Meeting the Ethical Challenges*, 94.