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Paul Spiegelman: Corporate Culture & Customer Satisfaction

Weeding the Employee Garden

4 tips to help you get rid of people who don't jive with the company culture

By Paul Spiegelman | October 21, 2009

Hiring people who complement my company's corporate culture has helped us push our employee satisfaction numbers to a five-year high and earned us the highest client retention rates in our industry. In fact, a few candidates have had as many as 18 interviews before coming on board. In most cases, our recruiting and assessment system works well. However, I recently had to end two senior-level relationships that were off-target from the start, forcing me to reflect on what had gone wrong.

After hiring both senior-level team members, I felt confident that I had a team that could go the distance and help grow the company. My mentor, however, warned me it wouldn't be long before my thinking would shift. "One is always weeding the garden," he said.

Weeding the garden, ideally, means creating an environment where people with great potential can bloom into peak performers. If you've weeded your garden expertly, you should never have to fire a peak performer.

The words were ringing in my ears when the mismatches became

apparent. One of the new senior level team members--who we'll call Jeff--was insistent on firing a member of his team he was struggling to manage. I explained that his team member needed to be made aware of the issues and given a chance to mend his ways. After all, we don't automatically send people out the door saying, "Thanks for your seven years of service."

When the problem employee came to me to discuss his challenges, Jeff couldn't believe he had the right to do so. Like a lot of managers, Jeff found transparency threatening. My response was that employees at all levels can talk to the CEO if they have a beef with a supervisor; there's no retribution because things usually get better once a dialogue is started. This was all too much for Jeff and he left the company.

The other new hire, a director in a key department, began implementing great ideas, but at a pace that made people feel threatened and uncomfortable. She was receptive to coaching, but was never able to strike a fit for our environment. The culture mismatch was felt by the whole team and decreased morale.

Tips for Weeding the Garden

- 1. Take time to hire for fit**
It's tricky to strike a balance between skills and fit, but I'd say that more than 50 percent of your decision to hire should be based on fit. Even when your business is experiencing rapid growth, don't let the pressure to hire quickly push you to employ the wrong person. You could end up paying the price in employee morale and ultimately customer service.
- 2. Make your interview process dynamic**
Screen for a fit at multiple levels using behavioral-based questions, social get-togethers (e.g., a friendly lunch), and personality assessments to gain insight into how a candidate will handle a variety of professional situations.
- 3. Respond quickly to a bad hiring decision**
Don't postpone a discussion with problem employees. Give them a chance to make necessary changes, or be more proactive and hold coaching

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sessions to work through an issue. Address this early and often before negative effects possibly start to ripple through your business.

4. **Keep the lines of communication open**

If you're too impatient to notice incompatibility, workers in transparent organizations will let you know if things have gone wrong. You should also go out of your way to let employees know it's okay if they wake up one morning and decide they're not on board with what you're doing.

My mentor called the other day and asked about my weeding. Humbled by recent events, I responded with his second favorite catchphrase: "The task is never done."

Paul Spiegelman is a sought-after speaker and author on customer service, culture and workforce engagement. As CEO of The Beryl Companies, he oversees the strategic planning and business development for the nation's leading company in healthcare customer interactions and relationship management. His book, Why Is Everyone Smiling? The Secret Behind Passion, Productivity, and Profit was published in 2007.