A Quick Release

By Larry Yonker

I HAD THE GREAT FORTUNE TO WORK at Compassion International while Wally Erickson was the president. A few weeks before Wally retired, I had the chance to talk with him about things he might have done differently in his career. "Looking back, I don't think I would have done anything differently, I just would have done it all quicker."

That principle shook me, and has guided many of the decisions I've made in the years since then. One area where this has been very applicable is when it comes to releasing an employee.

I prefer to call it "releasing," because "firing" is negative. As a CEO or Human Resources manager, I believe a termination is actually a releasing. You're releasing the person to fulfill God's plan for his or her life elsewhere. That's positive, and should be done with that spirit in mind.

When our firm was young, one person who came to work for us was bright, talented and seemed to have all the right tools for the job. However, she consistently made mistakes, and her attitude about these mistakes wasn't what we expected from her, given her positive demeanor.

Was she a bad employee? No. She was simply in a job that required less of her than she had to give, and she became bored. Fortunately, she knew it too, and was more than ready to leave after 90 days of struggling. It wasn't about her ability, it was about job fit. Today, we're still good friends. In fact, I'd give her a recommendation any time. She was the prototypical employee who's hard to release. She had all the ability but just didn't perform.

Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, says there are four types of people in every organization. First are those who share your values and perform. These are the greatest employees. Second are those who share your values but don't perform. These are people you'll work with to find the right job fit. Third are employees who don't share your values and don't perform. They need to be released to find what God has for them elsewhere.

Finally, there are those who don't share your values but perform at a high level. From Welch's perspective, these are the hardest to deal with because, in spite of their performance, they too must be released or they'll poison the organizational culture.

At The Elevation Group, we've tried to create a culture of respect, where every employee shares our values. However, when we find we have the wrong people in the wrong jobs, we live by the principle that we should release them quickly. We want them to find the place where they'll grow in their giftedness.

On the other hand, we'd never advocate that anyone take releasing an employee lightly. "How do you know when to release someone?" I asked Erickson. With the wisdom gained from a lifetime of experience, he replied, "Listen, anybody can make a mistake. I'm never so worried about mistakes. I'm looking for a pattern of behavior."

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I offer regular, clear and honest feedback when I identify that pattern. It's an opportunity to instruct and teach. It also lets the employee know what's being observed regarding performance.

The end result of this process, when it's working appropriately, is that being released will never be a surprise. Employees will understand that they're the ones in control of their own destiny. It's ultimately their responsibility to create value and find their niche within the organization's mission.

If you know things aren't working, make the decision sooner rather than later. We usually delay because of the discomfort we feel about letting someone go. Yet the person who really pays is the employee trapped in the wrong job. As leaders, we owe it to those we work with to give honest feedback and, to those who aren't a good fit, to release them to find their place of service in the Kingdom.

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