

What Do You Do When Your Best Employee Flies the Coop?

By Mary Ann Allison and Eric Allison

What you don't have to do is panic. Even if there isn't a successor in sight, there are six steps you can take to smooth the transition.

When Russell James, vice president of corporate communications for Avis, lost one of his top training directors, he was left with a huge hole in his organization. A replacement was waiting in the wings, but James felt he needed another six months to a year to groom the person for the job. He didn't have that time.

James figured he had two choices: bring someone in from outside or do the job himself until the internal candidate was ready to step in. Both options seemed equally unattractive.

If you're lucky enough to have a well-groomed successor for every key position on your staff, then you'll probably never find yourself in a bind like James did. But even if you do end up at a temporary impasse, you needn't feel your hands are tied. There are a number of strategies you can put into action to keep the department on a steady course.

1. TAKE THE PROVERBIAL BULL BY THE HORNS. The departure of a key employee often brings out the deepest insecurities of those who remain. Some are afraid of losing power in an organizational reshuffle; others may fear that you'll bury them under a load of new assignments.

"The best way to handle the situation is to tackle it by communicating regularly with your staff," recommends Dr. Lynn Diamond, president of Innovative Information Techniques, Inc. As soon as the resignation is official, rally everyone affected. Round up the departing manager's peers, his or her staff, and any others within or outside the department who worked closely with the person.

Explain why the employee is leaving and where he or she is headed. Keep it upbeat. If you don't have a replacement for the job, announce that you will be setting up temporary reporting lines. Outline a timetable for reassigning tasks and responsibilities. And by all means, address any concerns that may crop up during the meeting; you don't want to fan any mutinous rumblings.

2. DON'T LET THE LAME DUCK PERFORM LAMELY. With the proper monitoring, a great deal can be accomplished in the short time the departing employee still has on the job.

3. PART ON AMICABLE TERMS. No matter how aggravated or snowed under you feel, fight the temptation to vent your frustrations on the "traitor" who's responsible for the headaches. After all, that person may someday become a valued addition to your professional circle.

4. CONSIDER THE OPTION OF JOB REDESIGN. Before making major staff changes or additions, seize the moment to evaluate whether the job description needs revamping.

5. DIVIDE UP THE PERSON'S TASKS AND TEMPORARILY PARCEL THEM OUT TO OTHERS. Analyze the departing person's attributes, skills, and knowledge as unique and separate elements, advised Diamond. Then canvass your department for people who can pick up the pieces.

6. DON'T LET THE SEAMS SHOW. If your department works closely with other groups within the organization, make sure everyone in those areas knows what is going on.

A final recommendation from Diamond: "Guard against magnifying the contributions of the person who has left." There's a strong tendency for the "halo effect" to materialize, whether the person resigning is a former U.S. president or an ex-employee. The sins or weaknesses of the former job occupant are forgotten while his or her strengths are put on an altar.

The physiological trap can make all applicants look inadequate or sabotage the new person on the job. It's all too easy, even during a well-planned transition, to feel that "we can't live without so and so." It isn't true, but the belief can make it reality. ■

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