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Letting long-timers go

Many Green Industry publications have highlighted the shrinking labor market. In a sector as labor intensive as ours, the future doesn't look good. We need a large labor force, but it doesn't look like the labor market is getting any more expansive. Innovative benefits and higher pay scales have been suggested as ways to bulk up our employee rosters.

But there's another side to the issue which puts the company, its employees and its customers in a difficult position. I'm talking about termination of long-time employees.

Most employers depend on the long-time employee. They know the procedures, the rules, the customers, everyone else's job and what must get done. This is the kind of employee we want.

But what if the job isn't getting done or the rules aren't being followed? Many studies have cited the long-term employee as one of the most difficult types to discipline. Consequently, problems with this type of employee may be fundamentally malignant. In fact, it may be an imperfect relationship to which both the employer and employee have contributed.

The employee, because he or she has been at the company

for so long, has let the rules slide, and perhaps the employer's attempts to make the employee alter his or her ways weren't successful. Why does this seem to be the case? Have you ever been in a situation where someone thinks they can't be fired?

There are identifiable characteristics of your business or corporate culture that affect this kind of behavior, not only the long-term employee's but all your employees'.

Reluctant to discipline

There is a reluctance to discipline long-term employees, and this creates a discrepancy between you, them and other employees. Important aspects of corporate culture like high performance, competition, group unity, high morale and adherence to new policy are created and reflected by the long-term employee. In other words, as soon as management turns a blind eye towards changing the behavior of key personnel (perhaps due to their years of loyalty), expectation of a different response in the overall culture isn't realistic.

I once had to terminate two key people who had each been with me for five years. The problems with them were subtle and took several seasons to develop and in the face of the job market crunch, the decision was difficult. Have I solved all of the problems I had with these employees by letting them go? Yes.

There are new problems, but they're not fundamental. And I found out it takes less energy during the short term to find and re-train new staff to do things the way you want them done than it does to tolerate things being done the wrong way. I was surprised to find new people who were exactly what I had in mind.

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For more information, check out these books:

Goffee Rob, and Jones, Gareth. *"What Holds the Modern Company Together."* *Managing People.* Boston: Harvard Business Review, 1999.

Zenger, John. *Twenty-Two Management Ways to Achieve More With Less.* New York: McGraw Hill, 1997.