

# When a Boss Gets 'Fired' by Subordinates

BY JAMES F. BRACHER

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## *Managers can reverse bad situations with five-step plan*

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If you are a manager, owner or supervisor with serious personnel or productivity problems, there's a strong chance you have been fired by the people you employ.

Never mind the old line "they can't fire me - I'm the boss," it happens every day in every kind of business and industry. Just as employers scrutinize, rank, reward or punish employees, those who work farther down the ladder make value judgments and act for or against their superiors. A fired boss is at a disadvantage. At least the fired subordinate knows when the ax falls and can make a clean break, but no one comes right out and tells the boss his employees have sacked him. In fact, disaffected employees may appear to give even more personal attention to the boss for whom they will no longer perform, figuring that since they can't physically remove their supervisor, they can work around him or her. In a form of passive resistance, they offer minimum performance and increased absenteeism.

Grounds for firing the boss are more numerous than grounds for firing a subordinate, but in most cases, employees are fairly tolerant of management foul-ups. Employees won't "pull the plug" on a boss until management has done a fairly complete job of botching the operation.

Observation of hundreds of managers fired by employees produces the following list of 25 offenses that can get a boss "terminated." In order of seriousness, the crimes are:

- 1) Offer substandard wages and benefits comparison to other employers in the industry or geographic area;
- 2) Be rude or harsh in dealing with subordinates;
- 3) Refuse to listen to ideas and suggestions;
- 4) Criticize or discipline workers in the presence of their peers;
- 5) Pass over company people at promotion time for outside talent;
- 6) Fail to keep promises made or implied;
- 7) Permit wage inequities to exist between jobs;
- 8) Keep subordinates in the dark about future corporate plans;
- 9) Demonstrate a lack of technical knowledge of subordinates' work;
- 10) Show favoritism;
- 11) Make frequent changes in rules, assignments and hours;

- 12) Fail to prepare people for job growth and advancement;
- 13) Discriminate;
- 14) Make up personnel policies haphazardly and avoid putting the rules in writing;
- 15) Withhold praise for good work;
- 16) Frequently impose demands which force workers to choose between job and family;
- 17) Tolerate a dirty or poorly maintained workplace;
- 18) Have little direct and personal contact with employees;
- 19) Be inconsistent in disciplinary action;
- 20) Save up criticisms of an employee's performance until the manager brings himself or herself to a low boil and then roasts the surprised worker over a litany of forgotten sins;
- 21) Demand standards of performance from employees which the manager doesn't follow;
- 22) Be tardy with pay increases;
- 23) Be casual and imprecise in instructions to subordinates;
- 24) Ignore health and safety rules;
- 25) Demonstrate through personal actions that workers don't have job security.

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### **Middle and upper management people are as likely to 'fire' the boss as blue collar or hourly workers.**

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It isn't necessary to commit all 25 offenses - even one serious transgression on management's part may be sufficient to draw a no-confidence vote. Middle and upper management people are as likely to fire the boss as blue collar or hourly workers. Additionally, the potential for being fired by subordinates is the same everywhere, from corner grocery stores to multinational corporations.

Symptoms of leadership demise may appear first as a decline in enthusiasm and morale among employees. Workers will begin to grumble more loudly and more often about policies and procedures. A major indicator of trouble at or near the top of the

company is any upturn in absenteeism; a decline in quality or quantity of production also would set alarm bells ringing in the head office. The preventative medicine is simple. All bosses, even those who are certain that they are doing perfectly, must maintain an internal communications system that encourages feedback.

A "fired" boss usually is the last to know of his or her demise. Unhappy employees - at every level - will not remain loyal indefinitely. Titles, privileges, dollars and stock options are rewards which soon lose their potency in the face of underlying dissatisfactions with the workplace atmosphere.

Although the employee-fired executive may remain on the job for months or years after being mentally terminated by the hired help, a brutal crash is predictable. In the end, the chief is officially fired by those who will not abide by the end result: the plummet of profits.

But unlike the terminated employee, the fired boss has a good opportunity to be rehired by employees at almost any stage of the process. He or she must recognize the problem, understand the reasons and take action to be reinstated.

Consider the case of Robert V., a nonunion department head in a major heavy equipment manufacturing company. At 55, with 20 years invested in the company, Robert had a major obstacle in his path to become plant manager: most of the 32 people in Robert's department didn't work for him anymore.

Robert's first dismissal warning came in the resignation letter of his bright assistant who left the company in early 1981 for reasons more closely akin to frustration than ambition. And the way the resignation was handled damaged the morale and productivity of Robert's entire department.

First, the company made no effort to learn why Robert's assistant quit, erroneously taking the resignation at face value, including his letter's vague references to exploring new opportunities. Someone in management (i.e., Robert) should have spoken to the assistant in confidence; had such a meeting taken place, the worker would have explained that he worked the two previous years in a new job without any formal performance review. When the neglected

review finally came, it was packed with a rehash of old criticisms and devoid of credit for accomplishment.

The company's second mistake was bigger and even worse: Robert went outside the firm to recruit his new key assistant. When Robert passed over experienced and well-qualified people in the department, one could almost hear the morale crashing - and spreading to other departments in the plant.

As if the new assistant's arrival wasn't a hard enough adjustment for the department, at about the same time, the economy soured, paving the way for management's next blunder. The company raised product prices, eliminated some positions, reduced hours and imposed the kinds of workplace economies (i.e., wage, vacation and overtime restrictions) that hurt product quality.

Robert and the plant manager attempted to explain those decisions after the fact, but lost credibility three months later when the company reported a 26% after-tax earnings increase. The people who had been asked to work harder and smarter for less money were upset. The end result: nothing Robert said was believed and nothing he asked was achieved.

Absenteeism soared, and by the end of 1982, Robert was left with only six of about 35 employees who were on his department payroll two years earlier. The rest had resigned - some without prospects of new jobs. Turnover continues to run high even among the replacements who lack the productive power of experienced employees.

Robert's department, once among the best in the company, today is a shambles. His career advancement is on hold at least; it may be finished. Can Robert survive, rebuild the department and be rehired by his subordinates?

YES!!

If the channels of communication have completely broken down, a manager can take five steps to be "rehired."

- 1) Supervise by setting realistic goals for subordinates.
- 2) Develop workers by setting aside adequate time for training and monitoring.
- 3) Lead staff to better job behavior by praising good performance and sharing credit for success.
- 4) Communicate more effectively by listening carefully to subordinates.
- 5) Show no favoritism.

The approach requires a boss to recognize that he has been fired for cause by his employees. It demands management attitude and style changes to meet the challenge of the workforce. Managers often are most distant from younger employees; the manager must work hardest to incorporate those workers into his or her new philosophy.

It is only a short step for the manager from understanding the workforce to mobilizing the human resource it represents; he or she will be the rehired and renewed leader of the newly inspired workforce. Obstacle becomes opportunity as the trauma of being

"fired" ignites the boss's desire for self-improvement.

But not every down manager avails himself or herself of the opportunity to reform. Robert V. still hasn't implemented the five steps. Some people elect not to respond to the challenge because they have an inner fear of advancing beyond their capacity. Still others, perhaps more applicable in Robert's case, will refuse to accept that their future is within their own hands. Even when informed of their shortcomings, some managers don't believe that they have been fired by their employees - and won't be able to continue their own careers without them.

Today's managers clearly have a choice when decline strikes their foundation of profits: productivity. Some will insist that employees aren't as good as they once were and will settle for low morale, absenteeism, poor productivity and high employee attrition as necessary evils of doing business. Those bosses in effect will be abdicating the responsibility given to them for human resource management.

Rehired bosses will learn to motivate and stimulate workers, young and old, who are individuals first and employees second - people with pride in their work and who demand job satisfaction, a hearing for their ideas and the respect and confidence of those at the top.

Employee-fired executives who won't or can't acknowledge the underlying problem will continue to run their businesses on the brink of failure. Lucky ones will muddle through, while the less fortunate find themselves spending more hours in nonproductive meetings with union representatives.

If you have been fired by subordinates, don't be discouraged. Recognizing and correcting past mistakes is victory in itself. And you may find that in being rehired, you're also renewed.