

# FORWARD OBSERVER



Don't train 'em. Fire 'em!

By Samantha Chapnick

As learning and HRD professionals, we want to contribute to people's development and success. We don't like to give up on someone before we exhaust ourselves and every resource at our disposal. But it's time to learn to give up! It's time to stop training and start saying goodbye to some people.

### Black Holes, Toxic People

As co-workers. You know them. They never show up for meetings, or they don't do any of the work but manage to convince the manager they're the ones who did it all. They

- need to have everything explained a

zillion times and never get their tasks done on time, but have excuses

- eat up everyone else's time by asking for help or complaining
- dismiss others' ideas immediately and are quick to point out negatives, but never propose solutions.

As staff. They

- get upset at constructive feedback
- run frequently to the manager or HR with grievances
- need to be micromanaged, but complain about not having autonomy
- never do more than the minimum.

As training participants. They

- need instructions repeated and take

longer to complete exercises

- complain that the session is too difficult or the instructor is too fast
- seek help from the person next to them, but won't ask the trainer.

A Black Hole is someone who's often well intentioned and whom you can have sympathy for and even like. His or her behavior may derive from limitations such as an inappropriate match of his or her skills and job. Toxic People's behavior often derives from psychological issues such as lack of self-esteem or even psychosis.

Many people in an organization are different in some way or challenging. The temptation—often during a downsizing—is to put such people into the Black Hole or Toxic People category and get rid of them on that justification. That's not what I'm proposing. Before you fire someone, ask a diverse group of people—suppliers, customers, colleagues—open-ended questions to pinpoint behavior. Look at the person's work record (attendance and so forth) and training performance. If he or she is indeed a Black Hole or Toxic, it's time to part ways.

I realize I've taken a strong stance. The level-4 argument: Such people are a drain on company resources, their return-on-investment is low, and they lead to higher turnover. All true, but my argument is grounded in the belief that letting go of such people is a positive step in developing them. Letting them stay is detrimental to their personal and professional development.

### Why fire?

One reason is the inertia principle. Without interference, such people tend to continue behaving the same way. Chances are, people long ago stopped giving them any input, which means they have, in effect, been receiving positive feedback by

default, reinforcing the belief that they're doing things right.

Another reason is the brain-numbing principle. As such people stay and their reputations get around, others give them tasks that fall squarely within their abilities and don't give them new or challenging work. That prevents them from stretching. How much training can make up for that? Letting them go, quickly and respectfully, can provide these development opportunities:

**Know thyself.** The most valuable knowledge is self-knowledge. We're often more open to self-exploration when something we've done causes us pain or is viewed as a failure.

**Develop unused muscles.** The job search process can help people develop skills in goal setting, project management, self-marketing, negotiation, and networking, among others.

**Receive immediate feedback.** A job hunt or starting one's own business has a tight feedback loop: You send résumés, and someone bites or doesn't. You call for an interview and get one or don't. You do a pitch and make the sale or not. Such direct feedback can help people improve their skills, attitudes, and behaviors.

**Increase productivity.** Moving into a position more appropriate to your skills makes you more productive.

**Model tough love.** This applies to Toxic People only. Firing them teaches others such behavior doesn't work.

Ask what you're getting from the relationship. Most of us benefit in some way by continuing a cycle with a Black

Hole or Toxic People, perhaps for subconscious reasons. But once they leave, you're not responsible, unless you did something unethical or unfair. They earned dismissal through their own actions and attitudes.

Now, just because I don't think you should provide training for such people doesn't mean I don't think they need it, particularly self-assessment. Direct them to an outplacement firm that provides career counseling; your company could offer to pay for it.

Have a frank goodbye conversation. Unless your company's firing record disproportionately includes African Americans, atheists, or dog-loving lesbians, you have little to fear. Cite specific examples of behavior, not hearsay or feelings. Discuss the lack of performance and extra assistance given. Shy away from justifications, excuses, and negotiation over interpretation. This kind of difficult conversation is a treasure map. Later, the smart people, after the shock and anger wear off, will discover development opportunities.

Last, give yourself a pat on the back for making a good decision, and take time to reflect, gain perspective, and rejuvenate. You've done something difficult but beneficial.

*Samantha Chapnick is founder and CEO of Research Dog, an independent research firm based in San Francisco, schapnick@researchdog.com. She can be rented for speaking engagements in tropical paradises as long as her dog, Sierra, is also invited.*

## Respond!

Do you disagree? Send Chapnick an email c/o Haidee Allerton at [hallerton@astd.org](mailto:hallerton@astd.org). The best responses will be quoted in the next column.