

The first time I heard the phrase “*free up their future,*” I giggled a bit.

Gavin Adams

When I first had to make the painful decision to let someone go, that phrase ceased being funny. Human Resources decisions are challenging. They should be. After all, people are not resources but humans. These people have families. They have friends. They’ve committed to the organization and potentially to you.

Letting them go feels like a lose-lose situation. On one side, they lose a job. On the other side, as the leader, you lose a staff member. You’ll immediately face the daunting task of replacing them. And you’ll lose the relationship. It’s not easy to remain friends after a breakup.

With so much to lose, it’s tempting never to let anyone go. Keeping an underperforming person who doesn’t have a real future in the organization isn’t showing kindness. Don’t think for a second, you’re being altruistic in avoiding the difficult conversation.

The Organizational Cost to Keep People Who Need to Move On

Moving the mission forward is the charge for every leader. Everything ultimately is missional. This includes each staff position. Keeping people who need to leave hampers the mission. Leaders cannot allow that to happen. There’s too much at stake.

More, when you refuse to let a person go, the entire team suffers. Your team isn’t blind to the issues and performance of others. When you allow underperforming staff to remain for too long, they become a toxin in the cultural bloodstream. And the results are catastrophic. Your best leaders will end up leaving instead.

But there’s something even more important at stake here — the person who isn’t succeeding.

The People Price of Enslaving Their Future

I thought a lot about what word to use. Enslavement seems inappropriate and more significant than necessary. Perhaps. But enslavement seems too appropriate when I consider the harm done when we knowingly keep a person who has no future in the organization. We enslave people when they no longer have control of their destiny. What else would you call keeping a person who has nowhere to go?

First things first. When we realize, a person is struggling to succeed, we should do everything in our power to help them become successful. We owe that effort to them. Once all has been done to no avail, however, it’s time to make the hard decision and “free up their future.”

I don’t say that with a giggle. It’s a severe consideration we must make. When we keep staff members around only for our benefit, knowing they have no long-term future with us, we rob them

of what could be best for them. Every passing day that we hesitate or avoid the difficult conversation is a day they lose for their future.

When we keep staff members who need to move on, we are literally robbing them of what could and should be true in their work lives.

The Process of Freeing Up Their Future

During my leadership tenure, I've had the unfortunate task of firing several people. In every single case, I did what I could to help them succeed in the role. But when I realized they didn't have a long-term future in our organization, I had no choice but to let them go.

With each individual, the process was similar:

1. Start with a few lovingly clear conversations.

No staff member should ever feel surprised by a pink slip. Of course, no matter how clear you are, the person will act surprised if they eventually are let go. That's part of the painful process. But as far as it depends on you, be transparent throughout the journey. Be loving, but be very, very clear. Too many leaders dance around the issue allowing confusion to seep into the expectation. Be clear. Be loving but be clear.

Also, it's often helpful to have a third-party present for these conversations. This individual can help ensure the communication and next steps are clear.

2. Help them become successful.

Fund development opportunities. Read books together. Connect them with other leaders who may serve as a mentor. If they are on your team, they are your responsibility. We owe it to our staff members to support their success. We cannot skip this part of the process.

3. Maintain close contact with the team member.

As you work to develop their skills or approach, it's imperative to remain connected. Your proximity will show support and reveal progress.

4. Set up regular and frequent check-up meetings.

Once the initial conversation is had, proactively set up weekly check-in meetings to gauge progress and offer additional support. Again, as the leader, we owe it to the struggling staff member to support their development.

5. Present a plan.

If noticeable progress is not seen, create a detailed 30, 60, or 90-day plan. This plan must include specific and scheduled tasks and behaviors. Clarity is kindness. People deserve to know where they stand and what will happen if they do not perform. If you find yourself in this position, bring the plan in written form for both parties to sign. Again, seek clarity. And be sure the consequences for failing the program are clear, too. And have a third-party present for this conversation.

6. Monitor progress within the plan.

Monitoring progress seems obvious, but it's too often missed in the process. This can be done in weekly check-in meetings. If you give them a plan, they deserve your support within the plan.

7. When it's time...

When you know without a doubt that their days are numbered, don't keep them any longer. Nobody should exist as the organizational dead man walking. If you delay the final conversation, you are leading with selfish intent. When you realize they don't have a future in the organization, it's time for a difficult but loving conversation. They will most likely not agree. They will act somewhat surprised, which will surprise you. And they will not remain your friend. But you'll be freeing them to pursue another opportunity where they can have a bright future.

If at all possible, provide a financial offramp for them. Give them a month or two (or more) of full salary and benefits without any obligation to contribute to the organization.

8. Communicate well.

It's time to inform the staff, volunteers, and other key stakeholders of this personnel change. This can be tricky. I believe all the dirty laundry should be kept in the hamper. Meaning other people need not know the details. Set up a communication timeline in conjunction with the person leaving the organization. Write the email content for their exit but allow them to see it and suggest adjustments before sending. Lean in their direction at all times. This is not the time for gossip. This is the time for honor.

9. Begin searching for their replacement.

Only now you can begin searching for their replacement in integrity. Leaders are tempted to keep people around while they interview behind their back. This may help reduce the gap between the person who leaves and their replacement, but it is not honoring to the person leaving and doesn't set up the person following well. Make the breakup clean before you begin searching for their replacement.

10. Document everything.

Literally, in every meeting and following each conversation, document and distribute the conversation. Documentation is essential to provide clarity. Documentation is equally vital for any potential negative behavior on behalf of the leaving staff member.

Conclusion

As difficult as these conversations can be, I fully believe the kindest thing we can do for others is help them experience success in their job. If that cannot happen inside our organization, it's our job to help them grasp that reality and move towards a brighter future. "Freeing up their future" isn't a poor leadership joke; it's a loving way to prioritize people above all else.