



BY DAVID COHEN
For Workplace News

You're Fired! Did Donald Trump Teach Us Any Lessons?

"As the job market begins to loosen, companies could find that the years of retaining their best employees with merely the promise of a job are a thing of the past. Having been socked with three years of cost cutting, salary freezes and layoffs, some survivors are polishing off their resumes and preparing to bolt."

Julie Forster, Knight-Ridder Tribune News, April 11, 2004

"If in the next few months or years, you focus more on cutbacks than on keeping your key employees, your best people will be the first to hit the road. Ironically, the employees who are most insecure about their abilities and market potential will be the ones who hang on the tightest."

David Cohen, Workplace News, May 2001

By now, *The Apprentice* is over and Bill Rancic, one of the 16 original contestants, has survived a grueling competition to head up a division of Donald Trump's empire. The show was a

phenomenal hit. An estimated 18 million people watched it each week. Two hundred thousand people applied for the privilege of being fired, and many more applied for the next round. MBA programs reportedly used the episodes as a way of discussing team, leadership and strategy issues. Let's hope they didn't watch the show as a way of learning how to fire people properly. If so, we're all in trouble, not just because of the mode used to do the deed but also because of the message it sends to talented people about success and failure.

For those few who haven't seen the show, here's how it works. Participants are assigned to one of two teams. The two teams then compete against each other on a business issue: selling lemonade, designing a winning advertising campaign, developing a real estate property, and more. At the end of the show, three participants from the losing team are sent to the boardroom to be assessed by Donald Trump and his minions — a little like visiting the principal's office. Each of the three makes their case as to why they shouldn't be

fired, then Trump, with the wisdom of Solomon, decides who needs to go. He explains his reasons and pronounces the famous words: "You're fired."

What's wrong with this picture? On a procedural front, plenty. But there's a more important issue here than proper notice, documentation, discretion, and dignity. Layoffs aside, firing represents a failure of both hiring and management and employee performance. If someone fits an organization's culture and demonstrates the behaviours that lead to success in that culture, there should be no reason to fire that person. In many organizations, however, values are a mystery. They are part of a "hidden curriculum" of success that employees must discover in the dark.

On *The Apprentice*, Trump claims to value "leadership" and "street smarts" but his criteria for survival are different. First, he only fires someone from a losing team. This means he is primarily judging team results over individual behaviours. Second, he tends to focus — for dramatic purposes no doubt — on interpersonal

conflicts and failures. He doesn't fire the person who gets along with his teammates but makes no significant contribution to success. Instead, he either fires the really annoying person or the person who sticks his neck out, i.e., the one who demonstrates the most leadership but makes a mistake. As a result, Trump, week by week, winnows his talent down to a small collection of the bland leading the bland. Gone are the fiery disruptive personalities; gone also are the ones who displayed some leadership.

Every time you fire someone, you send a message to the rest of the people in your organization as to who is valued and why. Make no mistake, even if you never see that employee again, his or her experience will become known to friends in the organization and that knowledge will have ramifications. I was reminded of that when I got a call from a friend last week who works in outplacement. A major client, in the course of a merger, needed to lay off 1000 people. The client was extremely concerned that its people be treated right. It offered the maximum, not the minimum, due to those employees in terms of severance, notice, etc. My friend was on site as part of an experienced team of outplacement counselors to see that anyone who needed to talk through their concerns could do so. Naturally, those

employees were disappointed, but they understood the reasons and were satisfied with their treatment. As dismissals go, it was a positive experience that reinforced the culture of the company.

The Apprentice was so popular, I believe, because people have been through a lot of work-related nonsense in the last few years.

Unreasonable demands. Unremitting calls for higher productivity. Greater workplace stress. Not knowing who will be fired next or why. Because the economy is turning, however, many organizations are about to experience a different kind of reality.

Talented people always have options. Now that the jobless recovery is starting to show some better numbers, the best employees have a free ticket to a better situation.

The question you should ask is, have you provided them with the motivation to stay or leave? When the tables are turned in the boardroom, will they now be firing you?

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