Pulling the Trigger
By: Mark Goulston

Often the greatest regret after you fire someone is that you didn’t do it earlier -- sometimes it’s just better to fire sooner than later.

Do the following:

1. List all the people in your company that are not competent in what they do.
2. List all the people in your company that are competent, but whose attitude is negative and brings down the enthusiasm in the people around them.
3. List the ones you believe will change (i.e. incompetent to competent and lousy to good attitude).
4. List what you need to do to cause them to change and then what to do for you both to recognize it when it has happened.
5. List the people in your company who are incompetent or have a bad attitude and who will never change.
6. Why are they still there?
7. What do you think the cost of keeping those people is doing to morale and more importantly people’s respect for you?
8. What do you think the cost of keeping those people is doing to your respect for yourself?

The time and opportunity lost by having the wrong person (= not competent to perform the job they’re in), in the wrong place (= a position that is necessary for the company to succeed that is therefore going unfilled), doing the wrong thing (= not doing what is needed, much less making things worse) is something that a fast company can ill afford.

And yet time after time I have seen or worked with companies where this is the situation. Why are incompetent, negative people still there? There are many reasons and justifications, but the central one is that most business owners are conflict avoidant when dealing with underperforming, obnoxious people. The simple reason they avoid conflict is that dealing with it will involve a confrontation and most of these entrepreneurs, visionaries, or left brain analytic personalities have very low confidence that such a tête-à-tête will improve the situation.

What is going on that such problematic people cause great problem-solving CEOs or COOs to be stymied in this situation? What is occurring here is what often occurs with difficult people who are quick to become defensive, complain, whine or blame. When this happens they frustrate, exasperate and at times even infuriate thoughtful people into losing the ability to think clearly. Dan Goleman the originator of Emotional Intelligence refers to this as an amygdala hijack. This means that when a CEO becomes sufficiently frustrated by one of these people, his middle brain which includes the limbic system becomes agitated and hijacks him away from his upper human reasoning brain and throws him into his lower reptile brain where he is reduced to a “fight or flight” mode which takes all his energy to keep from reacting from. In other words, he shuts down before he gives into the impulse to scream or punch the person.

The problem is not that CEOs and COOs lack the will to confront someone, rather it’s that they lack the way to
do it. We’ve all heard the saying that “where there’s a will there’s a way.” What is equally true is that “where there is a way, there is a will.”

Jason Calacanis, CEO of Mahalo, and the subject of a Fast Company feature story, admits that he used to be lousy at confronting and firing such people, until he realized how detrimental it was to his company’s success by delaying the inevitable which served no one -- not his company, him or even the person to be fired.

Here is the approach he now uses. Calacanis tells the employee who is underperforming and/or has a deeply negative attitude: “You’re really great at a, b and c, but we need you to be great at x, y and z and also to have a much more positive attitude than you currently have. We have thought it through and think you are unlikely to be able to make the changes needed to meet the needs of our business. So we will give you two weeks severance (which the employee wouldn’t receive if he or she were fired) to land on your feet and a positive reference letter regarding the skills you are good at. We think it would be better for you in finding your next job to say that you resigned from our company, because your skills and goals were not aligned with ours than to say you were fired.”

Frank Melton, an employment lawyer with Los Angeles based law firm Rutter Hobbs & Davidoff Incorporated adds an additional suggestion if the employee can’t leave bad enough alone and comes back with: “So are you firing me?” He suggests you then say: “No. If you want to commit to making the changes that need to be made, we are willing to work with you to give it a try. These are the skills and attitude (and explain specifically what they are) we need from you that we are not currently getting. Take a couple days and come back and explain to us how you plan to correct them going forward and what specific behaviors you would commit to replacing them with. If it seems to make sense for the needs of our business and is doable within our culture, we will give you one final opportunity to turn around your performance.”

The final opportunity would be documented by a properly-worded memo summarizing the specific commitments the employee has made. Melton adds that if the person is highly destructive and toxic to the company -- and it’s clear you don’t want to keep the employee under any circumstances -- you may not want to offer this second chance, notwithstanding the potential legal risks involved (which should be carefully assessed with the help of HR and/or legal counsel.)

Another great suggestion comes from another colleague, Bruce A. Heller, Ph.D. of The Heller Group Inc. who says “Often the obnoxious or difficult people are behaving that way because they may want to be fired. Many clients have confided to me they openly rebelled against a new manager because they were unhappy but didn’t have the will to leave. Also, employees who implode may be acting out because their needs are not being met. When you stay calm, discuss observable behavior, and keep the context of a difficult discussion to the organization needs, you increase the probability the person being fired will have an easier time accepting the separation. You want to reinforce the adage ‘it is not personal, its business.’”