

Playing Deaf and Blind to Complaints About Your Hires? Consider the *Consequences!*

By Francie Dalton

So let's see – there must be a way to do it – to convince yourself that everyone else is wrong about the quality of your hires. To reassure yourself that your “personal picks” aren't mistakes, even though the criticisms are numerous, repetitive and fierce.

You could overtly ignore the complaints. Or you could pretend to listen politely, and then discount the input. You could attribute the complaints to petty jealousy and competitiveness. Or you could decide in advance that any opinion other than your own is invalid per se.

If you chose any of the above methods, here's what you're communicating to your employee base: that you protect those you hire, even if they're shown to be incompetent; that your ego prevents you from admitting that you made a bad hire even when it's obvious to everyone else; that when your hires erode productivity or generate



disabling conflict, you turn a blind eye and steadfastly refuse to acknowledge it.

So what is it that provokes and then sustains your cognitive choice to remain deaf and blind to complaints about the performance of your hires?

One reason might be that you're convinced that *your* truth is *the* truth – an arrogant but prevalent belief among self-confident, successful professionals. You trust your own opinions over those of others, and are loathed to base your actions on their complaints.

Or it could be that you're intolerant of *any* complaint – regardless of its nature – expecting employees to solve their squabbles without involving you.

Yet another reason could be that whenever you're under attack, you dig in your heels and become even more recalcitrant, refusing to reconsider. Indeed, in some ways, you're invigorated by the challenge, and become even more intent on prevailing.

Or maybe the way you lead and make decisions is based solely on your gut instincts. That is, regardless of any evidence to the contrary, you follow your own emotional compass.

Even if one or more of these reasons is true of you, it may be hard to acknowledge the fact. So let's look at a few scenarios to see if any are illustrative of your hiring history.

1. Everywhere you've worked in recent years, you've taken Joe with you. He has been your right arm, your confidant, your most crucial resource, your workhorse and your disciple.

Others complain that he's a complete and total social clod, consistently alienating key audiences. However, his utility and devotion to you are such that you're willing to take the hits.

2. You're unalterably convinced that Jack is a real star. You've worked with him for years in various organizations and are certain he's a great employee. His entire peer group, though, is telling you otherwise. He's incompetent, they say.

What gets done in his department is accomplished by his subordinates who are in constant fear of him. Using tantrums and intimidation to cover up his ineptitude, he belittles and bullies them into producing whatever is expected of him.

But his ultimate outcomes are consistently stellar, and you can't bring yourself to subordinate his deliverables to the hurt feelings of others.

3. Ever since you hired Jill, you've heard nothing but complaints about her lack of productivity. Peers say that she's a serious bottleneck, slowing everything down, and making progress impossible.

Her work products are so late, you're told, that by the time she delivers them the need has long since passed, and any opportunity associated with requests made of her have disappeared.

You, however, recognize high intellect in this woman, and you're energized by it, even if it's not accompanied by outcomes. So you protect her.

4. You're beholden to Jane. She literally saved the organization from financial ruin; or she stepped in and took the hit that you deserved; or she greased the skids such that you were able to succeed, or she found a way to protect you from embarrassment. You feel a tremendous sense of indebtedness to her, and aren't willing to abandon her – not even for cause.

5. There is literally no position open for the person you've decided to hire. Indeed, there isn't even office space available. But you have the power to bring this person on board, so you use it.

You make the hire without regard for HR processes, organizational fit, impacts on others, etc. simply because you want to, and, frankly because you can.

Stubbornly retaining or vigorously defending your hires despite repeated grievances from colleagues doesn't usually turn out well for anyone involved.

Even when your hires deserve your support, or when the complaints are based on perception rather than on fact, there comes a point when the fallout from keeping your hire is worse than starting over.

If your high-level hire hasn't been able to neutralize complaints fairly quickly, if key personnel remain resentful, designing artful ways to work around your hire, then perhaps the following might be reasonable options:

- Could this individual work from home, or become a contract employee?
- Could this individual be deployed in some other way within the organization such that his/her weaknesses/antagonistic characteristics aren't featured?
- Could you redesign work flow such that the need for collaboration is minimized?
- Could an executive coach be helpful to this individual and/or to those who work with this person?
- Could a professional interventionist negotiate agreement among the feuding parties to stabilize working relationships?
- Could you establish criteria, which define how you expect your subordinates to collaborate, and then hold all of them accountable for compliance with these methods?

If none of these options seem appropriate, perhaps it's time to accept that a particular hire isn't going to make it in your organization.

Continuous efforts to force the fit, or to persist in the deliberate choice to remain deaf and blind to complaints, won't insulate you; instead, you'll likely be putting yourself in the unenviable position of presiding over a long, slow, painful death.

If what others tell you about your hire is radically different from your own opinion, realize that *something isn't right!*

When remedial efforts aren't successful after a reasonable period of time, stop limping along in a suboptimal state; make the tough decision you're paid to make, and move on.

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