

When to Fire a Top Performer Who Hurts Your Company Culture

by Eric C. Sinoway | 12:00 PM October 15, 2012

My business partner and I had a tough decision to make. One of the top producers at our boutique partnership development firm was having a detrimental impact on company culture. Should we continue to support and reward him given his strong results, or should we cut him loose?

Our company, Axxcess Worldwide, was shaped in its early years by a small, tight knit group: my partner, Kirk Posmatur, and me and our first few employees. Now, after significant growth, we were honing our strategy, placing the right people in the right roles, continuing to deliver profitability while simultaneously maintaining a strong and meaningful corporate culture, something we consider to be one of our most powerful assets.

The new executive we were discussing that day was doing what we had hired him to: immediately deliver results. But he was doing so in a manner that didn't strike us as consistent with our culture; he was focused so intensely on "what he did" that he paid little attention to "how he did it," which resulted in consistently dismissing the opinions of others and pursuing what we felt was a strategy of "winning at any cost."

The dilemma reminded me something my former professor and mentor, Harvard Business School Professor Howard Stevenson had told me years earlier: "Maintaining an effective culture is so important that it, in fact, trumps even strategy." Later, while working on my recently released book *Howard's Gift: Uncommon Wisdom to Inspire Your Life's Work*, Howard and I created a classification system to identify those employees that help an organization's culture and those who hurt it.

Stars are the employees we all love — the ones who "do the right thing" (i.e. perform well) the "right way" (i.e. in a manner that supports and builds the desired organizational culture).

High potentials are those whose behavior we value — who do things the right way but whose skills need further maturation or enhancement. With training, time, and support, these people are your future stars.

Zombies fail on both counts. Their behavior doesn't align with the cultural aspirations of the organization and their performance is mediocre. They are the proverbial dead wood. But their ability to inflict harm is mitigated by their lack of credibility. They don't add much, but the cultural damage they do is limited (and, naturally, these are the employees most of us try to "flush out" of our organizations).

Vampires are the real threat. These employees perform well but in a manner that is at cross-purposes with desired organizational culture. Because their functional performance is strong, they acquire power and influence. Over time, they also acquire followers: the zombies who are who share their different set of values and aspire to better performance. Soon, there's a small army of vampires and zombies attacking the stars, high potentials and leaders who are doing the right thing.

When Kirk and I mapped our new hire against these categories, we realized the solution to our problem was obvious. He was a cultural vampire. And so regardless of his functional performance, we had to terminate him.

Eric C. Sinoway is co-founder and president of [Axxcess Worldwide](#), a partnership development company, and the author of *Howard's Gift: Uncommon Wisdom to Inspire Your Life's Work* (St. Martin's Press, 2012).