

Above All Else, Choose Character



Bill Leslie has more than 20 years' experience in auto-related businesses, including new car franchises, used car lots, high-risk auto finance, dealer rental operations, buying and selling franchises, dealership disaster recovery, and consulting to family-owned businesses.

BLeslie@AutoDealerMonthly.com

Six months ago, we caught an employee stealing on his first day on the job. We caught him red-handed. There was no doubt involved, and he admitted the theft. There were divided opinions among the decision-makers, but the decision was to give him a second chance. We really needed to fill that spot.

For the next few months, as far as we knew, he was a pretty good employee. While he may not have been our strongest employee ever, he did an acceptable job. That is, until one Saturday when he was arrested at 2:30 a.m. climbing through the window of our business. He was wearing gloves and had socks on over his shoes to hide his footprints.

We terminated his employment. As I mentally closed my file on this employee, I paused briefly to look back at the second chance we had given him. At first, I thought he was pretty foolish to forfeit a good job in our current economic environment. Then, as I considered our own actions, I

felt pretty foolish myself. What were we thinking?

I once heard that you can identify the two days your employees will look their best. The best day is the day of their interview. They will shine up for it, look you carefully in the eyes, listen to what you say, and put the best spin on their background and training. An employee's second-best day is their first day on the job. And yet, after catching an employee stealing on his first day on the job, we gave him another chance. He wasn't foolish for risking a good job over a few dollars. We were the foolish ones.

I remember the day we interviewed a salesman who drove in from the coast – about a hundred miles – for a 10:00 a.m. interview. He smelled suspiciously like beer. When we asked him whether he had been drinking, he acted surprised at the question and said, "Of course I've been drinking. I've been on the road for two hours. I had to do something." He admitted to having consumed two six-packs on the

way to the interview. If that was his best behavior, what would he have been like on a bad day?

This rule about looking their best is simplistic, but there is some truth in it. A new hire is more likely to be on time and follow directions carefully. If you teach a new employee the rules on their first day, they will probably be able to repeat them back to you, but six months later, the employee is likely to have forgotten a lot of what you told them.

What's the moral of this story? Well, I can think of three lessons I've learned.

First, don't delay action with problem employees, especially with new employees. Don't be afraid to change your mind or even to let an employee go in the first week. I'm not suggesting that you should be callous about changing your mind about a new hire, particularly when an applicant quits a job to come to work for you. However, if you think you've made a bad hiring decision, particularly when a character issue is involved, take action. Would you rather fire an employee on his first day for a good cause and feel good about that decision, or would you rather fire him three months later after a series of mistakes, arguments, missed work days or worse, serious accidents? The employee may feel bad when you let him go, but you will feel awful for having put up with him for three months.

Second, don't settle. Too often, when we are short a few employees, we hire someone just to fill the spot. If the applicant looks bad or gives you a bad feeling, pass them by and keep looking. Your other employees deserve

better, and so do your customers. A marginal employee is *not* better than no employee at all. They drag down their co-workers and make your managers waste time in unproductive endeavors.

The third lesson is that you must not compromise on character. We regularly decline to hire applicants who have multiple tickets for failure to pay the fare on public transit. We've passed over other applicants for multiple fish and game violations. One mistake can be forgiven, but more than one incident of this type tells you about the character of the applicant, and isn't that what you are trying to ascertain? Watch for skills, experience and training, but what you should look for most in your hiring process is the applicant's character. You can compensate for inadequate training or for lack of experience, but you can't change someone's character. We should no more have given the thief another chance than we should have hired the beer drinker.

You can't afford to be ambiguous about the level of honesty and integrity that you will accept from your employees. Even a minor infraction – the theft of a ream of paper, for example – should result in termination. By retaining that employee who stole from us, we told him and everyone else that we weren't serious about honesty. What will you get if you tell your employees you aren't serious about honesty? Missing down payments, petty cash shortages, forged signatures and fudged time cards (or worse).

Above all else, choose character. Then you won't have to wonder whether your employees know the difference between your dimes and their dimes. **ADM**

You can compensate for inadequate training or for lack of experience, but you can't change someone's character.

