

Management by Proverbs

Scriptural Wisdom for Superior Results

Michael Zigarelli



Copyright © 2008 by Michael Zigarelli

Management by Proverbs
Scriptural Wisdom for Superior Results
by Michael Zigarelli

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-60791-017-6

All rights reserved solely by the author. The author guarantees all contents are original and do not infringe upon the legal rights of any other person or work. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without the permission of the author. The views expressed in this book are not necessarily those of the publisher.

Unless otherwise indicated, Bible quotations are taken from The New International Version®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

www.xulonpress.com

Table of Contents



Introduction: Why Manage by Proverbs?	ix
Part I: Lay a Foundation for Success.....	27
Principle 1: Maintain a Biblical Worldview	29
Principle 2: Devote Your Work to the Real Boss	41
Principle 3: Be Humble.....	49
Principle 4: Assemble an Accountability Group.....	59
Principle 5: Prioritize Family over Work.....	69
Part I Case Study: <i>The Case of “Successful” Sam</i>	79
Part II: Excel at the Essentials.....	87
Principle 6: Think of Profit as a Means, Not an End.....	89
Principle 7: Plan Persistently	99
Principle 8: Design a Decision Tree.....	115
Principle 9: Execute with Excellence	125
Principle 10: Perfect Your People Skills	135
Part II Case Study: <i>When the Golden Rule Yields No Gold</i>	149

Part III: Build a Competitive Workforce	155
Principle 11: Measure Twice, Hire Once	157
Principle 12: Provide a Realistic Job Preview	169
Principle 13: Select a Like-Minded Management Team	179
Principle 14: Invest in Employee Training	187
Part III Case Study: <i>How Gay-Friendly Should Your Workplace Be?</i>	195
Part IV: Cultivate a Culture of Commitment.....	203
Principle 15: Build Organizational Trust	205
Principle 16: Relieve Employee Stress	217
Principle 17: Value Employee Input	227
Principle 18: Develop Employee Careers	237
Part IV Case Study: <i>Dictators Masquerading as Christian Leaders</i>	245
Part V: Measure and Reward Performance	249
Principle 19: Evaluate People with Precision	251
Principle 20: Deliver Criticism with Care	263
Principle 21: Reward Employees with Praise.....	273
Principle 22: Reward Employees with Profits	283
Part V Case Study: <i>When a Good Worker is Poor</i>	295
Part VI: Control Workplace Conflict.....	299
Principle 23: Restrain Gossip.....	301
Principle 24: Ensure Due Process	311
Principle 25: Terminate Troublemakers.....	321
Part VI Case Study: <i>The Downsizing Dilemma</i>	333
Epilogue: A Strategy for Continuous Improvement ...	337

Principle 25

Terminate Troublemakers



Prior to 1985, the hotel chain Days Inns of America was a Christian-owned-and-operated company. Its founder, Lon Day, Jr., sought to honor God by running family-oriented facilities, by not serving alcohol, by giving away more than 2.5 million Bibles to hotel guests, and by offering a large share of the profits to charity. He also honored God by stewarding the expansion of the business, growing it to more than 300 locations in fifteen years.

Mr. Day also cared immensely about his employees and even hired four full-time chaplains to counsel troubled workers and to resolve workplace conflicts. Sometimes, though, problem employees had to be terminated, especially the ones who took kickbacks or who harassed female co-workers. According to Day, dismissed employees would typically plead their case with a fervent: “You can’t fire me. I thought this was a Christian company!”

Day’s response to them? Simple and final: “God will always give you a second chance, but you have had your second chance with us!”¹

Some managers, like Day, seem to have little difficulty letting employees go. But for others, the prospects of terminating someone can turn even a seasoned business profes-

sional into a nail-biting novice. And when that professional is also a Christian, there's the added difficulty of reconciling the firing with God's call to servanthood, forgiveness, and love.

Although we'll have a lot to say in this chapter about balancing competing virtues, let's make one thing perfectly clear up front: *No where does Scripture say or even suggest that firing is impermissible.* No where. God's Word does not prohibit firing people. Quite the opposite, as we'll see below, under certain circumstances Scripture both sanctions and encourages us to fire certain employees.

It's also the case, though, that Christian managers have several responsibilities before invoking capital punishment in the workplace—responsibilities that include, but go well beyond, respecting legal mandates. As usual, God has set a higher standard of conduct for those who follow Him. We find much of this standard in Proverbs.

Proverbs on Employee Termination

Let's look more closely at the specifics of this "higher standard." On one hand, grace is the central pillar of the New Covenant. Calvary is God's supreme sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins, and as God forgives us, so too we should forgive others.

In the Old Testament as well we're taught to be patient and forgiving with those who have offended us. Proverbs 19:11 is a prime example:

*A man's wisdom gives him patience,
it is to his glory to overlook an offense
(Proverbs 19:11)*

One might argue, then, that since firing is the antithesis of forgiveness, Christian managers should not exercise this

option. On the other hand, both Testaments also indicate that it's entirely appropriate to excommunicate individuals because of their behavior. For example, staying with Proverbs for the moment, at least two passages stand out in this regard:

*Drive out the mocker, and out goes strife;
quarrels and insults are ended
(Proverbs 22:10)*

*Remove the dross from the silver,
and out comes the material for the silversmith;
remove the wicked from the king's presence,
and his throne will be established through righteousness
(Proverbs 25:4-5)*

Proverbs 22:10 makes plain what we know from experience: Removing problematic people from a group reduces conflict in that group. Digging a little deeper, the word translated here as “mocker” carries the connotation of “scorner” and “arrogant talker.” This is a person whose inflated self-image creates disputes and disrupts the work environment. The verse, it seems, gives us a green light to oust such people from our workplaces.

Proverbs 25:4-5 builds on this thought with a promise that goes beyond reducing conflict. “Dross” is the residue left behind after an ore has been purified by fire. From the smelter emerges pure silver, material that is productive metal for the silversmith. Likewise, for a work group to be as productive as possible, its dross—its “wicked” and, by implication, its “mockers”—must also be separated out. What's the natural result of this “purification” process? The proverb says that the king's “throne will be established by righteousness.” In a modern business context, purging these employees from

the group can pave the way for more effective, more God-honoring leadership.

We find a parallel New Testament instruction in 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul excoriates the believers in Corinth for tolerating an unrepentant, sexually-immoral church member. Expel this man *immediately*, the Apostle says unequivocally, because he will contaminate the church community. “Don’t you know that a little yeast works its way through the whole batch of dough?” Paul asks them rhetorically. “Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch...” (1 Corinthians 5:6-7).

When we juxtapose all of these teachings, then, it appears that we may have a problem. There seems to be a tension in the Biblical text between forgiveness and justice—a tension that lies at the heart of the Christian manager’s dilemma regarding termination. Since the Bible appears to support two different and opposite paths, what’s God’s will in this area?

As is sometimes the case in Scripture, when we wrestle with two seemingly incompatible instructions, we ultimately hear God’s voice more distinctly. By affirming passages that point in different directions, we can come to understand a more intricate scriptural principle, a principle that may not be wholly expressed in any one passage. That’s the case here. Through texts like the ones we’ve seen above, God offers at least three lessons for any Christian manager who is thinking about firing an employee.

Three Practical Lessons from Scripture

First, we can interpret the tension in Scripture as a divine reminder that there is seldom a quick-and-easy answer for dysfunctional behavior. God shows us through His binary teaching that Christian managers should neither impetuously fire an employee, nor overlook every offense. Neither extreme satisfies the Biblical mandate. Lesson One, then,

is this: *Avoid hasty decisions about firing or retaining employees*, opting instead for the more time-consuming path of circumspection and prudent reflection.

Second, the Bible instructs that our default attitude throughout this decision-making process must be one of patience and forgiveness. Of the two teachings that hang in tension with one another—essentially, law and grace—grace clearly supersedes. Again, this doesn't imply that we can never fire an employee. That's an over-simplification. Rather, Lesson Two is this: For the decision-maker, *grace must envelop law at every stage of this uncomfortable process*. In practice, this would mean that Christian managers should do at least three things: (1) offer employees the opportunity to correct problems, (2) evaluate whether employee difficulties are a result of poor management, and (3) consider assisting employees who will be forced to leave the organization. We'll elaborate on this in the next section of this chapter.

Lesson Three acts as a counter-balance to Lesson Two: *Occasionally, it will be not only appropriate but advisable to fire an employee*. From a scriptural perspective, an employee who undermines your leadership, who arrogantly scorns others, who perpetually creates conflict, who is corrupt, or who cannot follow the work rules, is tantamount to “dross” that must be removed for the common good. Christian managers, like all managers, have a responsibility to all stakeholders, not just to employees. So, responsible corporate stewardship will sometimes require that you get rid of troublemakers, troglodytes and traitors. There is no sin in this, provided that our heart is right and that we've marinated our process in grace and discernment.

Overall, then, harmonizing the difficulties in Scripture can give way to important insight on this complex issue. God calls us to invest lots of time and prayer into this decision, judiciously balancing law and grace—justice and forgiveness—whenever we consider firing someone.

Termination Tips

Throughout this book, we've highlighted many of the best practices in contemporary management that align with Biblical theology. That's especially important in this particular area of management, because so much is at stake in firing people and because there are so many legal constraints. Here's some practical, road-tested advice.²

Know and Respect Man's Law

Even those who do not recognize God's call to terminate with care will often do so anyway. That's largely because employee dismissal has become such risky business in most of the industrialized world. In the United States, government scrutiny of the employment relationship is everywhere, from federal, state, and local statutes to administrative regulations to common law, touching every employee management decision. Beyond that, people are growing more litigious. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, employee discrimination charges rose throughout the decade of the 1990s³ and continue that upward trend in the new millennium.⁴

Consequently, one of the first termination tips offered by almost every expert is this: Know the structure and parameters of employment law. Given the pervasiveness of man's law, as well as the scriptural mandate to respect man's law (e.g., Romans 13), this is wise counsel.

In the U.S., the basic structure of the law is that a manager can fire someone for any reason, unless some statute, some court case, or some contractual arrangement constrains that manager. In other words, the default condition, called "employment-at-will," is that a manager doesn't need a performance-related reason or any "just cause" to dismiss an employee; he or she just can't fire people for reasons prohibited in anti-discrimination laws, common law, or contract.

Lots of popular press books can provide you with the specifics of these regulations, as do many Web sites (see, for example, eeoc.gov, dol.gov, nolo.com, and your state department of labor Web site). As a quick primer, though, Table 5 presents a cross-section of the current legal boundaries in the United States.

Table 5
A Basic Overview of U.S. Employment Law

Law	Provisions	Enforcement Agency
Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, and sex	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
Age Discrimination in Employment Act	Prohibits discrimination against individuals age forty and over	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
Americans With Disabilities Act	Prohibits discrimination against any individual who meets the definition of “disabled.” Requires reasonable accommodation of disabled employees and applicants	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

National Labor Relations Act	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of a person's union status or support	National Labor Relations Board
State and Local Statutes	These laws parallel the provisions of federal laws to cover employers of every size (Federal law typically applies to employers of 15 or more employees). Some states and cities also extend anti-discrimination law by prohibiting employer actions based on marital status, sexual preference, smoking habits, and other criteria.	State human rights agency or State Department of Labor City administrative agencies for city ordinances
Common Law	Most states, through judge-made law, prohibit employer actions that would undermine public policy (e.g., terminating employees for serving jury duty) or that violate the employer's personnel handbook.	No enforcement agency. Employees must retain their own legal counsel and pursue their claims in state court.

Conduct the Termination Meeting Wisely

All of the points from Principle 20, “Deliver Criticism with Care,” apply here. But it may be helpful to underscore some of them and add others that are specific to termination.

First, it’s always a good idea to have the meeting in a private setting. Commentators are unanimous on this point and for good reason. Public or quasi-public dismissal is humiliating and provokes revenge.

Second, keep the meeting relatively short and to the point. Your criticisms should be honest and factual, avoiding subjective or unsupportable conclusions. Calmly explain your rationale for the decision and avoid arguing with the employee. You may find this difficult, especially if the employee throws the blame back on you or becomes verbally abusive. But arguing will only escalate an already tense situation, so permit the employee to vent without responding in kind. Remember, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1).

Third, you may want to offer the employee a chance to resign in lieu of being fired. For some employees, this will seem like no choice at all, but for many others, it’s an opportunity to save face. Especially for employees who could see this coming, they may be less bitter about the situation if they can honestly tell others that they voluntarily resigned.

Fourth, and contrary to the conventional wisdom, it’s a good practice to dismiss early in the week rather than later. Traditionally, managers have fired employees on Fridays, but anecdotal evidence suggests that this simply prompts the employee to stew all weekend and possibly to react more violently on Monday. Dismissing early in the week reduces this festering effect because the employee can begin making phone calls to seek employment the very next day.

Lastly, be sure to have benefits information available for the employee. Can health insurance be continued? Will

there be severance pay? Will you agree not to challenge any unemployment claims? Whatever benefits your organization offers to discharged employees, the termination meeting is the ideal time to present them since they offer a ray of light in an otherwise black conversation.

Help the Employee to Transition

A central objective here is to avoid marring the cause of Christ in this seemingly heavy-handed action. One way to do this, when appropriate, is to provide enough severance pay for the employee to transition to another job in a financially-seamless manner. Additionally, in light of God's concern for family stability, you may want to take into account the individual's family situation in both your decision to terminate and the size of the severance.

Another way to keep this person on his or her feet is to pay for a professional outplacement firm to help the employee locate suitable work. Maybe you can also offer to write a letter of recommendation for the employee, if you can make such a recommendation with integrity. The point is that throughout this process, we should maintain a servant's heart. Our Christian responsibility to love and serve our neighbors is not terminated along with the employment relationship.

Humility is the Key to a Godly Decision

If you've not yet dealt with a problematic employee, you will. And if you already have, you will again. There's simply no avoiding it, even if you work in a Christian setting. So before that moment arrives (or arrives again), think through how to handle the situation in a Biblically-consistent manner.

As we've seen, though, there's a real challenge here. God's Word is the arbiter of right and wrong, but on the

topic of firing employees, the Bible presents a complicated teaching. One thing that we know for sure, though, is that in this process, as in all things, our calling is to humility.

In practical terms, humility implies moving slowly and introspectively at the decision stage, asking questions like: “Did this person know the rules and expectations? Was improper training or some other management blunder the real culprit here? Have I really measured this person’s performance accurately? Is my decision motivated too much by profit concerns or by my personal distaste for this employee? Have I considered the individual’s family situation? And overall, am I honoring God as my Boss, reflecting His character through my decision-making process?”

These are hard questions and they take time to answer. But spending more time on our people is just part of the deal if we truly intend to be faithful leaders. We’ll put more effort into decision-making than anyone else and we’ll respect inconvenient—sometimes even counter-cultural—guidelines that our peers blithely ignore. That’s humility before God.

Nowhere is this more imperative for managers than when we contemplate termination. Our distinctive as Christians is the humble willingness to invest the time to seek God’s way—in this case, to balance justice and forgiveness. Sometimes God’s way will entail giving second or third chances, retraining the employee, offering lateral transfers for better fit, and so on. Other times it will entail delivering a pink slip. But one thing it will *always* entail is walking with our employees in hard times, whether we’re walking them back to their work station or out the door.

For Reflection and Discussion

1. In your opinion, is it somehow “un-Christian” or “counter-Biblical” to fire an employee? What scriptures might someone cite if they wanted to challenge your answer, and how would you respond to those scriptures?
2. Scripture seems to suggest that firing people because of character problems is legitimate, but what about problems with performance? Does the Bible support termination for poor performance? What’s the basis for your answer?
3. If an employee knows that you are a Christian, how can you fire him or her without seeming like a hypocrite?
4. If you have to lay off people because of economic conditions, what would be your criteria for deciding who stays and who goes?