

The art of letting go – of employees

Talking about parting ways is tough to say the least. Today, Caroline Franczia looks to Titanic for separation tips for leaders and entrepreneurs.

Despite all the effort you put into recruiting the right talent, believing you can keep everybody safe, happy, creative, and efficient forever is pretty utopian. It's far more utopian than it was to assume the Titanic had no chance of sinking.

Cal: 'God himself could not sink this ship.'

Talent is usually at its best at a specific company stage. Rare are the entrepreneurs, executives and even employees that can remain efficient from early-stage right through to large-scale. Some people are creative thinkers first and foremost. Others are problem solvers, while some excel at execution. Even if you find that rare person who is capable of doing it all, you shouldn't overlook their self-accomplishment, self-development, and ultimate happiness.

Rose DeWitt Bukater: 'It was the ship of dreams to

everyone else. To me, it was a slave ship, taking me back to America in chains. Outwardly, I was everything a well brought up girl should be. Inside, I was screaming.'

Some people will be comfortable during the early stages. They may feel out of sorts as soon as the team grows, silos form, and a structure is necessary. On the contrary, others are experts at the scale-up phase - operating better within larger teams with better resources and processes already in place.

It's rare to find people who thrive in each environment equally. Even independent board members have a limited time implication based on their 'stage' expertise and what they can bring to the table.

This all seems pretty logical - but don't forget you have to contend with emotions, attachment, and pride as well.

Why is it that when an employee, executive or founder is no longer satisfied, your working relationship deteriorates so drastically?

Rose DeWitt Bukater: 'I know what you must be thinking. "Poor little rich girl, what does she know about misery?'

Jack Dawson: 'No, no, that's not what I was thinking. What I was thinking was, what could've happened to this girl to make her think she had no way out?'

Why would you and your talent decide to go your separate ways?

Because of the company's constant evolution, the most obvious reason is as stated above. Most people don't have the capacity to adapt to arising changes

- to let go of the 'old way' of doing things. Bear in mind that, in the startup world, old can range from three to 18 months. That's how fast things move.

Similarly, people may not be capable of acquiring a new set of skills to keep up with the organisation. It does not mean that the person is not good enough. It does not mean this person is no longer fit to be considered 'talent'. It just means that they are no longer in the right place at the right time.

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Changes have consequences and are inevitable as you scale. Eventually, there will be a change of culture - where the old guard no longer has the room or the resources for growth. To support the company's thriving, new executives and new employees join, bringing their own experience, enabling more processes, setting up a new level of requirements, killing maybe a bit of the initial fun.

Sometimes, their arrival can be perceived as toxic, and sometimes there is a battle between the foundational team and the scaling team. It is essential to bring in the right people - and separate quickly from the ones who do not support your changes.

There are several ways a separation can go:

The ones that do not want to leave

Rose DeWitt Bukater: 'I'll never let go, Jack. I'll never let go.'

The attachment of the executive or employee is so strong that they will not consider leaving the adventure. They are no longer a fit, either because they cannot keep up with evolving new requirements or because they are still in 'early stage gear' (early stage is a period when everyone can make a difference and receive considerable recognition for their actions).

It is very difficult when you know someone is no longer a fit, but they refuse to leave. In this situation, remember to leave emotions and history aside. However likeable a person is, when it is time to part, the best option is to do so before anyone gets hurt.

Older Rose: 'Can you exchange one life for another? A caterpillar turns into a butterfly. If a mindless insect can do it, why couldn't I?'

Not parting at the right time could lead to bad feelings, toxicity, and a possible strong impact on the overall team productivity if the person concerned used to be likable with influence.

The ones you can't imagine doing without

Jack Dawson: 'Don't you do that, don't say your good-byes. Not yet, do you understand me?'

They have built your company; they are part of the foundation walls; they are the essence of your success. However, they have decided to abandon ship and join a new adventure.

Because of your shared experience building the company from the ground up, you cannot imagine doing without them, and you are ready to reinvent everything in the company to keep their presence.

This type of reaction is emotional. Do not go down that route. When someone is ready to go, support them. Keep them close, as an advisor or mentor, but do let them go. You'd be surprised. They may come back down the road with more experience and more will to kill it by your side.

The ones that are mature and make it smooth

Wallace Hartley: 'Gentlemen. It has been a privilege playing with you tonight.'

This is the ideal situation. In this case, both parties have a plan for this separation from the beginning. You have hired someone to do a particular job during a certain time; you both knew that, after a few years, it would be time to move on.

This used to be the case of the chief digital officer. Often hired to enable the digital transformation of large corporations, they knew their job would last for a determined period - and this was the proof they had done their job well. In this situation, you have a mature, open discussion about what is best for the company moving forward, including how to organise the separation and transition best.

The ones that should not have been

Last but not least, there are people who - in hindsight - were hired in error. On paper, it was a perfect match. In reality, the talent just didn't fit in well at your organisation.

The new employee does not belong or is overwhelmed, and within a few weeks, you feel responsible for hiring the wrong person but too guilty to engage in a clean separation. Don't. Freeing someone earlier than later is best not only for your organisation, but also for the person you are letting go of. Putting your talent under performance review and pressure to make it work is a cruel way to extend a situation you already know cannot work.

Rose DeWitt Bukater: 'Well, I'm fine...I'll be fine...really.'

Jack Dawson: 'Really? I don't think so. They've got you trapped, Rose. And you're gonna die if you don't break free. Maybe not right away because you're strong but...sooner or later that fire's gonna

burn out...'

Rose DeWitt Bujater: 'It's up to you to save me, Jack.'

Jack Dawson: 'You're right...only you can do that.'

The important lesson is that not letting go at the right time, in the right manner, can cost your company a lot. A toxic employee is contagious and will demotivate those around them – thus directly impacting productivity, revenue, and churn.

Worse still, your reputation will then precede you – and make it challenging to hire true talent. To avoid this, discuss concerns with transparency, lay out expectations and implications clearly, and monitor and discuss the skill/will ratio regularly (quarterly) with your talent. Last but not least, make the right choices at the right time in the proper manner to avoid affecting company culture and reputation.

Bruce Ismay: 'But this ship can't sink!'

Thomas Andrews: 'She's made of iron, sir! I assure you, she can. And she will. It is a mathematical certainty.'

Caroline Franczia is a regular columnist for Maddyne and the founder of UpperCut First. Experienced in working for large companies such as Oracle, Computer Associates, and BMC, Caroline also lived in Silicon Valley for four years before moving to startups (Sprinklr, Datadog, Confluent) where she witnessed on the ground the benefits of a well-thought sales strategy. These are the foundations of UF: a structure that accompanies the European startups in their sales strategy by giving them an undeniable advantage in their go-to-

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