

# How to fire someone ... kindly

By [Chris Rowley](#)

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Whether you can fire someone compassionately is an interesting question with the immediate answer normally being: surely not. But the truth is more nuanced, depending on the circumstances and how public and drawn-out the "threat" of being sacked has been. Also, of importance is the country it occurs in - in the US, for example, ["employment at will"](#) essentially means that there can be "termination at will", too.



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[Louis van Gaal's recent sacking](#) as manager of Manchester United hardly looked like a textbook case of ["compassionate firing"](#). However, we can use it as an example to explain whether you can ever let go of someone kindly. What techniques are employed? Is it best to do it at the start of the week or the day, for example, or the end? What should be said? Who should be there? And what happens when it all goes horribly wrong?

We need to set out some key points and assumptions. First, there is the issue of the lexicon used here. The word "firing" is inflammatory and subjective, with its implications of suddenness and some sort of wrongdoing. The words "termination" and "dismissal" are only a little less so, while ["redundancy"](#) has far more neutral connotations, but also implies that the position itself has become surplus to requirements rather than ripe for the filling by someone else. Then there is the issue of whether the "firing" has been on the cards for a while or whether it comes straight out of the blue. Third, we will assume that the dismissal is legal or, if not, well compensated.

## The personal touch

Needless to say, the message is best not delivered by impersonal email, Facebook post, text message or telephone (or, as happened in the past, fax). Nor should the employee hear about it first via the press, as appears to have happened with Louis van Gaal, or another third party.

The organisation should also avoid abrogating responsibility by outsourcing it, as aptly demonstrated in films such as [Office Space](#) and [Up In The Air](#). In the latter, George Clooney plays a hired "corporate downsizer" who flies between organisations to conduct "termination" meetings, and whose HR consultancy wants to cut costs by switching to lay-offs by video conference.

Rather, the decision needs the personal touch, with the relevant line manager involved and should be delivered with respect and thoughtfulness in a neutral place allowing each side to leave with dignity.

It should also follow steps in a procedure that is not only fair, reasonable and consistent, but is clearly seen to be so and is known. Guidelines from organisations such as [Acas \(Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service\)](#) and the [Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development](#) stress such procedures.

Furthermore, planning can help protect as best as possible the organisation. This involves compiling a standard list for the meeting that covers what will happen and when in terms of: security of IT, facilities (access to email, keys and so on) and property (phones, laptops, credit cards), as well as remuneration, benefits and any agreements covering such things as confidentiality and non-competition. As we will see below, it is never a great idea to allow continuing access to company email, let alone IT networks and files.

When it comes to the best time for letting someone go, this depends if the person already knows the “sacking” is likely to come and the likelihood of feelings of resentment. There is no consensus on this. For some, the end of the day at the end of the working week would seem to be best for all concerned, making the departure less dramatic, but others suggest the start of the week to give the employee the opportunity to start their job search straight away.

In terms of what should be said, clearly it depends on the reasons for the dismissal. The meeting is best kept short as it is to inform, not discuss. Remaining polite and civil is cost-free, as is giving wholesome thanks for contributions, service and past achievements. Remember, the world of work can be an incredibly small place and you just never know when – or under what conditions – you might meet again.

Brutal firings are bad PR for firms, too. One can think of [“Neutron Jack” Welch](#) at GEC. His [“rank and yank”](#) system of sacking staff, whereby those in the bottom 10% of annual performance curve were fired, was always going to put staff

under tremendous pressure. Other examples of poor practice that produce poor PR include Yahoo's sacking of chief executive Carol Bartz [over the telephone](#) in 2011 and AOL CEO Tim Armstrong firing a creative director [live during a conference call](#) to over 1,000 employees in 2013 – this went viral.

Of course, in case we forget, the entire workforce can also be impacted by firings, potentially damaging commitment, motivation and the psychological contract.

## Private, not public

But who should be there at the meeting? It should never be done publicly, but there's a fine balance between privacy and the need to offer adequate support. It might be suggested that a colleague or friend be with the person concerned, but then it may seem more like a disciplinary meeting. To protect both sides, the person delivering the news should also have someone there, to take verbatim notes and perhaps even to get the person to sign a document setting out what has happened, what happens next and that the procedure was conducted in a fair and reasonable way.

Finally, what might happen when it all goes horribly wrong? There are plenty of war stories of revenge wreaked by disgruntled former employees. Bartz, for example, immediately [sent an email](#) to all of Yahoo's staff, revealing that she had been sacked over the phone – hardly good for morale. But client lists, company reports and records, expense accounts and IT systems could also all be at risk.

It can get pretty destructive. One sacked Russian airport worker, for example, was so disgruntled that he destroyed an [aeroplane with a digger](#). And at the far extreme, things can get really scary. In August 2015, for example, a sacked American reporter [killed two former co-workers live on television](#).

All in all, there is a need to make dismissals as dignified and "friendly" as possible as there are risks and costs involved. We certainly should not in any way act like Alan Sugar or Donald Trump in *The Apprentice*. A straight "You're fired!" may well cause more trouble than it's worth.

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