

## 6 Reasons We Hang on to Marginal People, and What to Do About it

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I've made this mistake myself as a senior executive. Maybe you have too, or know someone who is making it right now: hanging on to a chronically low-performing person way beyond his or her expiration date.

Why do we hold on to someone we know we shouldn't keep in place? In my experience as an executive and an executive coach, there are six reasons, and it's usually a combination of several:

1. Out of a sense of kindness or loyalty. Maybe you like them, they like you, or both, and maybe their tenure in the organization has been long and successful – until the last few years. You might stick with them, even when it's a bad situation for others, the person, and/or yourself.
2. Out of a desire to be a “nice person” or please people, and not to be the “bad guy.” Perhaps you worry about their family, livelihood, or future were you to make a change.
3. Avoidance of having a prolonged “hole” in your organization – that is, even though they aren't doing very well, they're better than you having to do your job PLUS their job until you can replace them.
4. Fear or avoidance of confrontation. These conversations are difficult, and you simple don't want to have it. This again can be tough when you really like the person.
5. Be overly optimistic about people's ability to change, even when facing a situation where you've done your best. You say to yourself, "Maybe if I give it more time," or "Maybe I'm not helping them enough," etc.
6. Misplaced belief that they are irreplaceable -- the “glue” holding their division or organization together, and that if you get rid of them, their group will fall apart.

## What to do about it

When someone on your team is performing marginally, it's hurting themselves, their colleagues, and you. So it's up to you first to support any potential positive change for them by offering the resources in your power to help them improve.

Once that's been done, and if the issue persists, then no one is doing anyone a favor by keeping them in place. I'm not recommending you fire someone with a long and successful career who's had a few bad months or quarters. Yet if you've done everything you can to help, and the problem persists, it's time you help them find a better professional situation.

I will never forget when Carol, an executive who was my boss 22 years ago, changed my life for the better. She proactively made calls for me, made recommendations, and helped me take the next step in my career – ultimately one much better suited to my strengths.

So if you've done everything you can and are still holding on to a chronically marginal person, it's time to look at which of those six reasons, or combination thereof, is behind that pattern, accept it, and make a change.

When you do, take a lesson from Carol: if you can avoid it, don't dump them, or send them off to an outplacement firm – put your own time in to help them land in a good situation, as you would someone you care about.

Recognizing your pattern of holding on too long, and helping all involved by making a positive --if difficult -- change is not only good for you and your organization, but it's the right thing to do.

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