

Lessons from a shape sorter

Remember the shape sorter toys you had when you were a child? They're not only a fun challenge, they teach children about categorization and shape names. They also teach cause and effect - when I put this object in here, it disappears - as well as the concept of impermanence - it went in there but I can get it back...how cool!

We learn early on that square pegs don't fit in round holes, but we seem to forget that lesson as life goes on. Maybe we don't want to hurt someone's feelings when we're playing sports and we put Little Johnny in on offense when we know he's really only good at defense. We carry this forward through life to management when we have employees that don't fit in the position they were hired for and we just keep moving them around trying them in different holes. We know they are a square peg yet we keep trying to put them in the round hole, then the star hole, then the octagon, maybe even the triangle. That's not to say that certain high flying employees aren't shape shifters (not in a Sam Merlotte True Blood kind of way) that learn and morph into new positions - it's just up to us to be sure to talk it through with them first - employment is a 2-way street.

When we have a square peg and they don't fit in any of the holes it's in our nature to keep trying. Why? The human factor. Just like we didn't want to tell Little Johnny he shouldn't play forward, he's a sweeper, we want to do everything we can to keep people employed. We hired them, we made that decision to bring them into the company, and don't we have a duty to keep them employed? Many times this feeling forces us to put that person into a position they are neither qualified for nor do they really want to be doing it. In reality, we do them and the company a disservice to push them into the wrong hole and then leave them there. We now have a person in a position they aren't competent at and probably not happy doing, not a good recipe for success.

The decision to part ways with employees for many of us is the most difficult thing we do as managers. But remember what we learned from the shape sorter way back when, it's impermanent. Not shoving that employee into the wrong hole may be the best thing that ever happened to them and it's certainly what's best for the organization.