

# MANAGEMENT BY PROVERBS

Scriptural Wisdom for Superior Results

MICHAEL ZIGARELLI

9 to 5  
MEDIA

# CONTENTS

---

<b>Introduction: Why Manage by Proverbs?</b>	3
<b>The Manager in the Mirror</b>	
PRINCIPLE 1: Commit Your Work to God	21
PRINCIPLE 2: Lead with Humility	29
PRINCIPLE 3: Lead with Integrity	37
PRINCIPLE 4: Avoid Cultural Conformity	45
CASE: What Really Matters at Work?	57
CASE: Peter at Polydeck	59
VIDEO CASES: Flywheel, Wall Street, The Letters, The Blind Side	65
<b>Managing Your Organization</b>	
PRINCIPLE 5: Consider Profit a Means, Not an End	71
PRINCIPLE 6: Be Guided by Core Values	79
PRINCIPLE 7: Plan with Many Advisers	85
PRINCIPLE 8: Simplify the Structure	97
PRINCIPLE 9: Execute with Excellence	105
PRINCIPLE 10: Improve through Analytics	113
PRINCIPLE 11: Provide for the Poor	119
CASE: The Downsizing Dilemma	129
CASE: Big Problems at Big Idea	131
VIDEO CASES: Moneyball, Jobs, Jerry Maguire, The Founder	137
<b>Managing Your People</b>	
PRINCIPLE 12: Perfect Your People Skills	145
PRINCIPLE 13: Measure Twice, Hire Once	157
PRINCIPLE 14: Build Organizational Trust	167
PRINCIPLE 15: Value Employee Input	177
PRINCIPLE 16: Motivate through Praise	187
PRINCIPLE 17: Deliver Criticism with Care	195
PRINCIPLE 18: Terminate Troublemakers	205
CASE: When a Good Worker is Poor	215
CASE: Praising People to Success at Mary Kay	219
VIDEO CASES: Freedom Writers, Miracle, Apollo 13, Dead Poets Society	225

## **Managing Your Life**

PRINCIPLE 19: Train, Don't Try, to Become a Better Person	231
PRINCIPLE 20: Pursue Excellence in Everything	235
PRINCIPLE 21: Clarify Your Calling	241
PRINCIPLE 22: Rejoice in the Spouse of Your Youth	245
PRINCIPLE 23: Guide Your Kids to Walk with the Wise	249
PRINCIPLE 24: Invest Your Money Faithfully	253
PRINCIPLE 25: Don't Be a Slave to Your Feelings	257
PRINCIPLE 26: Close the Gratitude Gap	261
PRINCIPLE 27: Tame Your Temptation	265
PRINCIPLE 28: Get Rid of Gossip	269
PRINCIPLE 29: Ten Commandments for Difficult Conversations	273
PRINCIPLE 30: Keep Listening to Instruction	279
CASE: Successful Sam	283
CASE: Creating a Career Plan	289
VIDEO CASES: Chariots of Fire, The Pursuit of Happyness, Amazing Grace, Fireproof	293
Notes	297
Index of Proverbs Used in this Book	313

## Principle 18



# 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 do God's will by running family-oriented facilities, by not serving alcohol, by giving away millions of Bibles to hotel guests, and by gifting much of the profit to charity. He also honored God by stewarding the expansion of the business, growing it to more than 300 locations in 15 years.

Mr. Day cared about his employees, too, and even hired four full-time chaplains to address their personal and workplace needs. Sometimes, though, problem employees had to be terminated, especially the ones who took kickbacks or who harassed 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!"<sup>1</sup>

Some managers, like Day, seem to have little difficulty letting employees go. But for others, the prospects of firing someone can turn even a seasoned business professional into a nail-biting novice. And when that professional is also a believer, there's the added difficulty of reconciling the termination with God's call to forgiveness and love.

Although we'll have a lot to say in this chapter about balanc-

ing competing virtues, let's make one thing perfectly clear up front: *Nowhere does scripture say or even suggest that firing people is impermissible.* Nowhere. God's Word does not prohibit terminating employees. Quite the opposite, as we'll see below, under certain circumstances, scripture both sanctions and encourages severing the relationship.

It's also true, though, that to be a faithful manager entails 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. We find much of this standard in Proverbs.

### **Proverbs on Employee Termination**

Let's look more closely at this "higher standard."

On one hand, grace—unmerited favor—is fundamental to the biblical way of life. It's taught and modeled most strikingly in the crucifixion of Jesus, God's sacrifice of his son 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 extend grace to those who have offended us. This proverb is a prime example:

*A person's wisdom yields patience,  
it is to one's glory to overlook an offense*  
Proverbs 19:11

How's that for a counter-cultural approach? Not an eye for an eye, but an overlook.

Applying that to a potential termination, then, one might argue that faithful managers should overlook rather than over-react. Since firing is the antithesis of grace and forgiveness, perhaps managers shouldn't exercise this option. Some of Lon Day's employees seemed to think as much.

On the other hand, both the Old and New Testaments also indicate that it's appropriate to excommunicate individuals because of their behavior. Staying with the Book of 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 the silversmith can produce a vessel;  
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 narcissism and haughtiness creates disputes, disrupting the work environment. The verse, it seems, gives us a green light to oust such people from our workplace.

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 is purified by fire. From the smelter emerges pure silver, material that is productive 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 through 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 insists, because he will contaminate the church community. “Don’t you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch...” (1 Corinthians 5:6-7).

So what are we to do? When we juxtapose all of these teachings, we 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 faithful manager's dilemma about termination. Since the Bible appears to support two different and diverging 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 opposing directions, we can come to understand a more nuanced scriptural principle—a principle that may not be fully expressed in any one passage.

That's the case here. By combining the texts we've just seen, the scriptures offer us at least three deeper lessons for any manager who's considering firing an employee.

First, we can interpret the tension in scripture as a reminder that there is seldom a quick-and-easy answer for dysfunctional behavior. Managers, it suggests, should neither impetuously fire an employee, nor disregard a pattern of offense. Neither extreme satisfies the biblical mandate. Lesson One, then, is this: *Avoid hasty decisions about firing employees*, opting instead for the more time-consuming path of circumspection, investigation and reflection.

Second, the Bible instructs that our default attitude throughout this process should be one of grace. 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 call managers to, at the very least: (1) evaluate whether employee difficulties are a result of poor management, (2) offer employees the opportunity to correct problems, and (3) consider assisting employees who will be leaving the organization involuntarily. We'll elaborate on this in a minute.

Lesson Three acts as a counterbalance 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 perpetually creates conflict, who is corrupt, or who will not follow the work rules, is tantamount to “dross” that must be removed for the common good. 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, holding in tension the two disparate directives in scripture offers us fresh insight on a complex issue. God calls us to affirm both law and grace—justice and forgiveness—whenever we consider letting someone go.

### **Termination Tips from the Trenches**

Throughout this book, we’re seeing best practices in management that align with biblical theology. That’s especially important in this area of management, since so much is at stake when firing people—and since there are so many legal constraints. Here’s some practical, road-tested advice.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Know and respect workplace laws*

Even those who might 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 the industrialized world. In the United States in particular, 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.

Consequently, among the termination tips offered by almost every expert is this: Know the structure and parameters of employment law. Given the pervasiveness of these laws, as well as the scriptural mandate to respect the authorities placed over us (e.g., Romans 13), this is wise counsel.

In the United States, the basic structure of the law is that an employee can be fired for any reason, unless some statute, court case, or contractual arrangement constrains that employer. In other words, the default condition, called “employment-at-will,” is



that an employer doesn't need a performance-related reason or any "just cause" to dismiss an employee. The employer simply can't fire people for reasons prohibited by anti-discrimination law, common law, or contract.

Plenty of websites and books clarify the specifics of these regulations. As a quick primer, though, here are the some of the legal boundaries in the United States.

AN OVERVIEW OF U.S. EMPLOYMENT LAW

Law	Provisions	Enforcement
<b>Title VII of the Civil Rights Act</b>	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, and sex (including sexual orientation and gender identity)	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
<b>Age Discrimination in Employment Act</b>	Prohibits discrimination against individuals age 40 and over	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
<b>Americans with Disabilities Act</b>	Prohibits discrimination against any individual who meets the definition of "disabled." Requires reasonable accommodation of disabled employees and job applicants	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
<b>National Labor Relations Act</b>	Prohibits discrimination on the basis of a person's union status or support	National Labor Relations Board

<b>State and Local Statutes</b>	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). Many states and cities also extend anti-discrimination law by prohibiting employer actions based on marital status, smoking habits, political affiliation, and other criteria.	State human rights agency or state department of labor  City administrative agencies for local ordinances
<b>Common Law</b>	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 organization's employee handbook.	No enforcement agency. Employees must retain their own lawyer and pursue their claims in state court.

*Conduct the termination meeting wisely*

All of the points from Principle 17, "Deliver Criticism with Care," apply here. They will serve you well. But let me also share a few ideas from the management literature that are specific to termination.

- It may be prudent to rehearse what you are going to say, and to visualize the moment in advance. This is true for any difficult conversation, but especially helpful when you're potentially changing somebody's life. To get it right, envision the situation, practice what you're going to say, and perhaps even role play the conversation with someone who can respond as the employee might.
- 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.

- Keep the meeting relatively short and to the point. Your criticisms should be entirely factual, avoiding subjective or unsupportable conclusions. Don't over-explain; by this point, nothing should not be a surprise. Just calmly clarify your rationale for the decision and avoid arguing with the employee. That may be 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).
- 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 others it's an opportunity to save face. In particular, for employees who could see this coming, they may be less bitter about the decision if they can honestly tell others that they voluntarily quit.
- It's often a good idea 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.
- Be sure to have benefits information available for the employee. Will there be severance pay? Will you agree not to challenge an unemployment claim? Can the dismissed employee pay to remain on the company's health plan? Whatever benefits your organization offers to terminated employees, this is the time to present them, offering a ray of light in an otherwise dark conversation.

*Help the employee to transition*

A central objective here is to avoid marring the cause of Christ in a 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 find 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 responsibility to love and serve our neighbors is not terminated along with the employment relationship.

### **Discernment Instead of Default**

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 faith-based setting. So before that moment arrives (or arrives again), clarify your process for how you'll handle the situation in a biblically-consistent manner.

As we've seen, though, that's still a significant challenge. The Bible presents a multifaceted teaching on termination: Have the grace to overlook offenses, but at the same time, discharge the dross.

What all that means is if we find ourselves defaulting to a cookie-cutter solution—grace or law—we can probably do better. Be more discerning. Faithful management will sometimes entail a development plan for the employee, or an internal transfer to a better-fit position. Other times it will entail 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 “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 claims?
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? And what would be the objection to your answer?
3. If an employee knows that you are a person of faith, 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? For deeper insight, revisit the case study “The Downsizing Dilemma” from earlier in this book.