

“It’s For My Family”

Category: Behaviors

One of the most frequent weasel words you hear as an employer are some variant of: “it’s not for me but for my family”. Beware when you hear this...it often signals the need for a pay raise, but it can also be an indication that what is coming is not only self-serving but that it will probably cause you some pain and may in some way be unethical.

The best way I can figure it out, hiding behind the family responsibilities (starving, barefoot kids begging on the street, etc.) seems to create a sense of entitlement in the mind of the employee that somehow makes outrageous requests or actions justifiable. When you hear the words coming out, take cover because what follows next may very well shock you.

I think that when an employee starts to make that justification, they are giving you an insight into the way that they think, and effectively giving you notice that down the road, when it suits them, they will do something that hurts the company and justify it with the “family” argument. The “family” justification may come up in an innocent context and if it does my advice is that you should look to remove those people from the team and find a replacement.

It most usually happens when people are resigning to take a job that pays more money or that represents a “better opportunity”. The “family” angle contained in the statement may simply be their unease at having to tell you that they are leaving and effectively asking you for more money to have them stay. The “better opportunity” is a horse of a different color and may well presage some behavior that is, to put it in the best possible light, on the edge of good taste.

Just to be clear, I was always a very family friendly employer and recognized that the family would always take first priority, as it should. I am not talking about the need to take time off to deal with emergencies or changed personal circumstances, and I always bent over backwards to accommodate those needs. What I am referring to is when the family is used as an excuse to salve the conscience and justify behavior that is unethical and inappropriate.

On my saner days, I smiled at the “better opportunity” speech. People would come and say that they weren’t looking but that this incredible opportunity found them. In some cases that may actually have been true...but in most of those cases, the opportunity depended on them leaving a) immediately and b) the company in the lurch. More damaging, their exit often required them taking business with them to the new company.

I had a technician who originally came from the manufacturer we competed with and who worked for me for about ten years. We had some run-ins but we trained him, gave him learning and promotional opportunities and he increased his salary from \$50,000 a year when he started to about \$100,000 a year. He was always difficult but overall I would have said it was a reasonable relationship.

His letter agreement said that we would give him either two weeks’ notice or two weeks’ pay in the event that he was terminated. In return he agreed to give two weeks’ notice if he resigned.

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We were going through some tough times and having major issues with a mass defection of employees and customers to start up a new company in competition with us. He had been offered a position by the manufacturer and appeared like a brown stain, unannounced at my office door one day to give me the news.

He told me he was resigning. He told me about the wonderful opportunity to go back to work for the manufacturer in an exciting capacity, and then he unleashed the body blow....they wanted him to start the next day and he was leaving as soon as he walked out of my office. I pointed out that he was breaching his agreement and leaving the Company in the lurch and asked how their planning could be so poor that they have to have him immediately

He told me that they wanted him to go on a training course that “starts tomorrow” and then came the justification for his behavior: “It’s not that I want to hurt the company but I have to protect my wife and son, and I’m just doing what’s best for my family”.

I realized that there was nothing more that could constructively be said that I looked him in the eye and wished him well in his new endeavor. In my heart I hoped that one day somebody would do the same thing to him.

Another disturbing and revealing episode was when two of my best technicians who between them had very strong customer relationships with business worth about \$1.5 million a year told me that they were going to leave and work for a competitor who had made a very nice offer to pay significantly more than what they were making with me.

I made the usual arguments about how we had trained them, nurtured them, and invested in them and all the great arguments that company owners make. I pointed out that the new company would almost certainly expect them to exploit their customer relationships to take customers away from us to help their aggressive growth plans that would allow them to go public.

If you’ve got far enough into this article to be reading this, it will come as no surprise to you to learn that they said: “Our primary concern is to put food on the table for our families, and since this is just business we can’t see why that would be the wrong thing to do”.

It is very difficult to react to a comment like that unemotionally, and so I asked them to wait 24 hours and talk again so that I could think about it for a while. They agreed, and the next 24 hours were spent talking to my sales, accounting and operational people, consulting with my lawyer at enormous expense and trying to figure out my options.

I called the company that wanted to hire them as I knew the principals and asked them why they were poaching my employees. Their response was that these people were disgruntled and were going to leave anyway. I kept them by paying them about \$25,000 a year more than they were making and I guess that the only satisfaction I derived from the whole sorry episode was calling the predator competitor to tell them that the employees were staying and pointing out that they were wrong in their justification and that they were simply opportunists of the worst kind.

The end of the story is that the two technicians both left six months later anyway for yet another

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opportunity.... and when they did they told me that they were doing it “for their families”. I realized that I had really made the wrong decision completely and it changed the way that I reacted to these situations in the future.

One closing story that made my jaw drop at the time relates to a salesperson who left to work for a competitor. I have no issue with that, but he proceeded to breach his non-compete by soliciting the very customers we had given him to work on. We sent a “cease and desist” letter, and his lawyer wrote back the immortal sentence: -- “please leave my client alone – all he wants to do is to look out for the best interests of his family”

As soon as I hear the “family” justification now I realize that I am dealing with somebody who lacks ethics and projects their personal needs above their business responsibilities. It amounts to a warning that they will behave unethically when it is to their advantage and probably damage the company. Once I know that, I start the hiring process immediately so that I can part company with them as soon as I have found a replacement.