Set targets and assess before firing the guy

Q: A year ago, we made a wrong hire for a senior position. While the guy has all the necessary qualifications and experience, his performance was not up to standard. Worse, several actions made by him have actually led to a decline in staff morale and two old-timers have left. If I fire the guy now, I would be seen as making a wrong decision since I was the one who hired him. How can I plan for the guy to exit on his own accord?

A: For brevity – I will refer to the person as X.

First, do you know which aspects of X’s performance are below par? Could any of these be improved by training or counselling?

Try to have a talk with X, in a constructive way with a view to giving feedback and improving performance. You might want to structure it by asking X about what he thinks he has done well so far and what could have been done better. It may be that as a result of this conversation, he becomes aware of his shortfalls in performance.

If he does not see any problems, it gives you a chance to indicate where improvement is needed and jointly set some targets for improvement. This establishes a record of your having counselled or coached X. After this session, give X a few more months to improve and then review his performance again. This will send a message that his performance is being monitored, and he may decide to leave if he knows that he is not meeting the targets.

Eventually, if you do decide to fire X, you will have shown that you did try to work with him to improve performance. This is important because other employees will see that you have a fair process.

Regarding the departures and fall in morale, are you sure that the reason lies with X? Is it really a result of X’s actions, or could it even be disgruntlement that you hired X instead of promoting them? Their reasons for departure/fall in morale would help you get a clearer picture.

If all else fails, you might get comic relief from what one secretary did to get rid of her boss. She reportedly sent his CV to headhunters. Eventually, he was headhunted away and left on a high note.

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