

This is a story about a guy I fired years ago and the unintended consequences.

It has been on my mind for a few days to write this story.

I'm not entirely sure why.

This is not a humorous story but it does have a good ending and a moral.

I recently traveled to San Diego for the 2007 Congress of Neurosurgeons.

We make some products for neurosurgery but we don't do enough business to justify having a booth at every meeting. I went because it is still a good venue to meet people and do business.

Anyway, I went alone and since we did not have a booth, I didn't have a badge for admittance. Not having a badge didn't bother me, as there are ways to get around that requirement.

This story starts about twelve years ago when I hired a sharp young man to help grow our international sales. He had the right education and he was experienced in international business. His father was a respected senior executive in the medical device field. His wife was a beautiful, talented Korean native, who like her husband, specialized in setting up international sales. They had an infant child at the time.

He was a friendly and likable man and a little formal. I liked that. He preferred to be called by his proper name so I will refer to him in that way. When I hired Lawrence, not his real name by the way, there were hints that he drank too much now and then. I asked him about that and he assured me it was not a problem.

Things went well for a couple of years, but everything came apart on a crucial trip to Japan. He traveled alone on this trip which was normal. Over a period of several days I got a series of frantic calls and messages from our Japanese distributor telling me that something was very wrong. Apparently Lawrence began drinking on the flight to Japan and never really stopped until the flight home. The Japanese had set up an entire program of training sessions and meetings with top Neurosurgeons all of which were to be led by our American expert. All they got was a few embarrassing minutes with a drunkard. The Japanese were furious. They had lost face in front of important people. For the Japanese, nothing is worse.

I fired Lawrence immediately on his return to the company headquarters. The firing was of course justified. It wasn't even a close call. The whole company knew of his behavior. There is nothing that takes a greater toll on morale than failing to weed out workers who hurt the organization.

Over the course of a long career, I have fired a lot of people and I think I have learned how to do it humanely if that is possible. I told Lawrence that he could come back at an appointed time the next day to empty his office. I don't really recall but apparently I said a few words to him about the risk he was running of losing his family and his career.

When Lawrence returned for his things the next afternoon his wife and his father came with him. His wife was incredibly sad and that was heart breaking. We don't really know how people raised in other cultures take things. It seemed to be a terrible blow to her. I had not intended that, but then this story is about unintended consequences.

His father came to my office, not to ask for anything, but rather to apologize for his son and to tell me how ashamed he was. The poor man, who I know was a strong and solid leader, was on the edge of tears the entire time.

Some days are more challenging than others.

I didn't hear anything about Lawrence for five years, maybe more. Then I started to hear reports that he had started a medical device company. He had partnered with a solid businessman who at one time had been our German distributor. The company was apparently doing well.

In the years since, I frequently run into Lawrence at conferences around the world. His company has grown rapidly. In fact at this meeting where I cannot justify an eight-foot booth, he has a 30 by 30 foot island display.

I'll finish this story by recounting our latest chance encounter at this most recent conference, the one in San Diego.

As I previously wrote, I did not have the proper badge and frankly I had no intention of paying the required \$500 for a one-day pass. I easily walked onto the exhibit floor without a badge but that is probably another story. There is a trick to it though.

Anyway, I visited with folks and worked my way across the exhibit floor for perhaps an hour before I came upon Lawrence's big island booth. Lawrence was there with about ten of his salespeople and some surgeon customers.

When Lawrence saw me he stopped what he was doing and began introducing me to the people around him. Lawrence noticed that I did not have a proper badge. He sent his sales people looking through the storage places in the booth saying, "I know we have an extra badge here somewhere."

They did find one.

This was not the first time such a thing has happened.

In fact it's pretty much standard routine each time Lawrence sees me.

I was just doing my job and I fired him. I don't recall that I even intended to do him a favor.

He thinks I turned his life around. I didn't of course, he did.

Life has a lot of unintended consequences. Watch for them.

Love

Dad