

by Boyd Byers

Chaos Theory, 'The Slows,' and HR

In physics, chaos theory is the concept that systems rely on an underlying order and are sensitive to initial conditions. As a result of this sensitivity, a small error or imprecision in the initial conditions grows at an enormous rate over time. Thus, two nearly identical sets of initial conditions applied to the same system result in two vastly different final outcomes.

Applied physics for the HR professional

So what does physics have to do with HR? Consider that every time you make a hiring decision, you are establishing the initial conditions for that position. Your system, or company, is sensitive to the initial conditions. Make a mistake, even a small one, and it grows exponentially over time. The result? Chaos.

That means you need to avoid errors in the hiring process. According to a recent study, nearly half of new hires will fail within 18 months, so you've got your work cut out for you. Hiring mistakes are costly in terms of recruiting and training expenses, lost productivity, and legal claims. Given the high price of failure, an initial investment of time and money in the hiring process can pay off big later.

More employers than ever before are using screening and assessment tools to try to weed out potentially bad employees during the selection process. Keep in mind that federal and state laws preclude or limit certain types of tests, so make sure your selection methods pass legal muster. For example, if you use a neutral screening test that has an adverse impact on a protected group, the test must pass a formal validation study or it may be unlawful.

Don't overlook tried and true methods such as scrutinizing resumés, asking substantive questions relating to the work, and calling former employers and references. Obvious red flags include omitted information, frequent job changes, unexplained gaps in work history, backward career steps, and questionable references.

A case of 'the slows'

Despite your best efforts to improve your selection and hiring process, you may still end up with a bad or mismatched employee. Now what? (The impossibility of precisely measuring

initial conditions is part of chaos theory, so this is not totally unexpected.) Chaos theory says errors will increase exponentially over time, so you need to quickly cut your losses.

Let's digress from physics to history. During the Civil War, Union General George McClellan was much maligned for his failure to take action. His critics, including President Abraham Lincoln, believed he was too cautious and made excuses for not engaging the enemy when the time was right. McClellan had a chance to capture General Robert E. Lee's army and end the war in 1862, but he delayed and let Lee escape, resulting in three more years of bloody conflict. Lincoln famously said that McClellan suffered from a case of "the slows" and relieved him of his command. The lesson, of course, is that inaction, when action is necessary, can have unfortunate consequences.

We see a lot of cases in which an employer refrains from firing an employee who needs to be fired. Sometimes the reason is fear of a lawsuit. Other times it's an unwillingness to deal with an unpleasant task. Sometimes the decisionmaker is too busy to get around to it or just procrastinates. Such cases of "the slows" almost always turn out bad for the employer. The poor performance or bad behavior necessitating discharge persists and often worsens, making life miserable for everyone involved. Plus, the employee usually figures out that things aren't going so well and starts documenting everything management says and does in an attempt to build a lawsuit. Or, worse yet, the employee makes a preemptive strike in the form of a discrimination complaint or workers' compensation claim, setting up a retaliation claim.

Don't take this advice as a recommendation to throw caution to the wind. Before firing an employee, always make sure you know the facts, do a risk assessment, ensure that discharge is consistent with your policies and treatment of other employees, and satisfy yourself that performance and behavior can't be improved through more training or discipline. But once you decide it's time for the employee to go, it's time for the employee to go — lest you end up with exponentially increasing error or three years of bloodshed.

She said it

Every great mistake has a halfway moment, a split second when it can be recalled and perhaps remedied.

— Pearl S. Buck