

He Quit Before NeoCon, But You Countered and Kept Him: Fire Him After the Show?

Dear Stephen:

My brother and I bought a small furniture company a few years ago and have had some success. Building on that good fortune, we have expanded our investments to about a half-dozen small furniture manufacturers. We manufacture office furniture, soft-seating and even hospitality furniture. Our focus is on re-establishing brands the market already knows but that had not been doing well. We picked up some bargains and are turning them around. We are well-financed and well-organized, and it's paying off.

We primarily use independent reps for outreach, sell our products through dealers to keep our cost down, and very few fixed salaries are on our books. In some major markets like NYC, we have invested in building our own showroom

for some of the brands and hiring on-site employees, but, in general, we're really happy with the work our independent reps do. Our brands are well known, dealer-driven lines but not glamorous. They aren't A&D darlings, but they're priced just right — cheaper than the major manufacturers.

Our business structure is very simple: Each company is run separately and has a few executive positions and just a handful of other employees. That said, we usually have a hard time attracting talent because of our location combined with the status of the brands and what we want to pay these people, which is not much! I have, however, found a trick. I've had a lot of luck hiring people who have been let go from the major furniture companies, for whatever



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: StephenSays@bellow.press

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @stephenviscusi, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.

reason. Someone else's trash are our retreads.

When Steelcase, Herman or Haworth downsize, or some old-timer is offered a less than generous package, I step in and hire them. At first, many of them scoff at our brand, but they usually don't have many options, and I can make them all VPs. We also let these new hires live almost anywhere they want to, since we do not want to spend the money to relocate them. It's a win-win. They get a cushy landing spot, and we get the vast knowledge they have from the big-

ger companies. These folks also know the dealers from their previous roles, and those major dealers all need alternative dealer's products like ours, which is another win for us.

Pretty genius, huh? I thought so, too. But recently one of these retreads got an offer to go back to one of the fancier companies. I was angry because this is someone no one else would have hired when he first got canned, but once he was a VP he got some attention. He told us he was leaving right before NeoCon, where I needed him to be visible for our dealers and the independent reps. We decided to counter his offer and talked him into staying. Now, I want to fire him within six months of NeoCon, just because of his disloyalty. My brother (and partner) disagrees and says we should keep the retread. I feel like we got played, and he deserves what he has coming. I want to use him through the trade shows and then get rid of him. Am I crazy? Who is right, me or my brother?

Signed,

Hire the Fired and Fire the Hired

Dear Hire the Fired and Fire the Hired

I usually wouldn't publish such a long message in full, but I was riveted by your business model. I love it! There is an interesting pattern to your methodology: you buy old, undervalued brands, and find old, undervalued people to rejuvenate them. You and your brother sound shrewd and seem to have a knack for recognizing which brands and people among the spurned and cast aside are worthy of a rehabilitation project. You buy second-rate companies, hire second-rate employees and still turn a profit. More power to you! I love the initiative, and I love that you're reviving some of the brands that have fallen out of favor.

Now to the meat of the question. But before I do, one last point: Quit it with the "re-tread" nonsense. Clearly it doesn't mean anything if you can leverage these hires into such a successful business. It is an ageist shibboleth for stuck-up, vapid, self-proclaimed, hotshots to identify hiring older workers cheap. The only people you're impressing by putting people down like that are others who are insecure enough to deride their own

employees. If you're as smart as you seem, this language is beneath you.

Which leads me to your question. I'm not quite sure why this guy getting another offer has you in such a state. It might have been unprofessional for him to leave at such a high-leverage moment, but if anyone understands negotiating from a position of weakness it should be you. This employee seems perfectly suited to work for you. He is clearly scrappy and willing to fight, and that's the type of person you need in your line of work. Smart companies go after smart people, and you should take it as a compliment that you so successfully turned his career around. Most people would have craved the trappings that big companies have to offer, but this guy did stick with you. He turned down perks and prestige for what I can only imagine was marginally more money, if even money. That is loyalty. Still, my money says he'll do it to you again if he has the chance. Keep an eye on him, and be ready to cut ties. That's all you can do. What's the alternative losing a good employee? It's not worth it.

Stephen