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SEPARATION WITH DIGNITY

Is there a correct way to terminate an employee? Absolutely!

Business leaders, assisted by their partner HR professionals, have the opportunity to share many strategic initiatives that build a successful business. Rarely are they in the mind-set to see separations, especially involuntary separations, as “an opportunity.” In many cases, that is because the leader’s ego becomes involved and fear of the terminated employee’s reaction can lead to awkward and undignified separation meetings and exit interviews.

Over the past two decades, I have had the honor to work with many capable leaders when a negative employment decision needs to be delivered. As an HR executive, my job is not to conduct the release, but rather to sit with the party as a witness and to ensure that all necessary information is provided to the affected individual(s).

The key to any release is simple: Dignity. Ensure that the leaving employee exits with their dignity intact. That will de-escalate any heightened emotions in the moment, and greatly lessen the probability that there will be any post-employment complaints.

Here are some points to observe:

1. Ensure that the meeting takes place in a private office or board room, with an impartial witness (preferably HR). Do not embarrass the employee on their way out by making their release a spectacle, and do your best to not “ambush” the employee.
2. Have all your facts in order. Be prepared to tell the employee the exact reason for your decision, and avoid using any “feeling” words (adjective and adverbs). Stick to events, times and dates.
3. Get right to business. Do not start the meeting with small talk; asking about their weekend or their children. I suggest you start with a statement such as, “Thank you for meeting with me and (witness). The reason we are meeting today is to let you know that the company has decided to end your employment with us. We realize this has impact on you, and you may not have been prepared for it, so we are here to answer your questions and let you know what the next steps are.”

4. At some point during the conversation, it may be helpful to reiterate that this is not a personal reflection on the individual, but a necessary business move.
5. Remain calm and supportive. Remember, their situation is changing, yours is not.
6. If the affected employee becomes emotional or argumentative, do not take the bait. Remain calm and supportive. You can simply say, "I understand you are upset, but our decision is final. I am here to help in any way I can to make your exit as smooth as possible."
7. Be sure HR has all the necessary information for the affected employee on hand to give them (COBRA, PTO pay out, Final Pay information, 401K, etc.)
8. If possible, give the affected employee the option of collecting all their personal items immediately, or setting a time for them to come back and gather their things. Some individuals will be emotional, and will not want the office to witness them cleaning out their desk.
9. You will need to ask the individual for any access cards, keys, phones, etc. Be sure to do so with great respect. You may say something to the effect, "Before you leave today, I will need to collect any property that belongs to the office, such as keys, access cards or phones."

Here is a point that may provide some comfort. If your company has been managing the employee well, and using a progressive disciplinary plan, or keeping all employees abreast of the financial prospect of the company; a final employment decision should not come as a total shock to the individual.

It costs you nothing to maintain respect and ensure a level of dignity for your now ex-employee, but the return on investment is huge. Such treatment boosts morale amongst leadership and workers, decreases anxiety and drama around separations, and promotes a clean exit with reduced cause for hard feelings and subsequent action.

For more information, or for answers to any questions, contact:

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