

Too Much Information

Is it possible for a manager to have too much information about an employee?

Yes, and all managers must follow a code of conduct to protect themselves, their employees, and their company from unwanted risk due to “knowing too much personal information” about an employee.

Most of us spend more time at work than we do at home, and so we build relationships and confidences with our co-workers. Many people consider their co-workers to be their closest friends, and even family. In this environment, people often feel free to discuss personal issues such as health concerns, relationships, financial predicaments, and even physical abuse. What makes this problematic is the fact that employees really do not want their managers to know all their personal challenges, and more importantly, manager DO NOT want to know all their employees’ non-work related issues.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) protects all workers from discrimination based on the following protected categories: race, color, religion, creed, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, physical disability, mental disability, veteran status, genetic information, and citizenship. In today’s work environment, all seasoned managers know to avoid any questions about protected categories in employment interviews. The reason is clear; to prevent any negative hiring decision from being linked to discrimination. We know when hiring, our only objective is to hire the best candidate, with the best qualifications, who can perform the job requirements, with the best ability, at the best time. Sometimes, in an interview, a candidate will offer more information than is required, and the manager can politely tell them that it is not necessary to share information that is not required.

Unfortunately, when an employee is working, and becomes comfortable with their “work family,” they may feel safe to discuss their depression, addiction to sleeping pills, unseen disability, stress from an abusive relationship, financial hardship, or any other personally challenging situation. This information, if it reaches the manager, will no doubt cause concern. While the manager will want what is best for the employee, they also need to protect the business and the team, and it will be difficult for them to

discount any new information that may be perceived as affecting work performance or posing a risk at the work place.

For the manager, the guidance is clear: DO NOT ask a question you do not want the answer to.

- Do not ask any personal questions that would give you protected information which could be viewed as discriminatory (i.e. Marital status, sexual preference, chronic medical conditions, etc.).
- If an employee seems upset about a non-work related issue, do not invite them into a more private area and then ask them to tell you “everything.” If they end up disclosing protected information, they will be able to say that you “elicited the information” from them.
- If an employee starts to tell you information you do not want to be the custodian of, politely and professionally tell them that while you are concerned, you are not the professional to help them with their particular issue. Suggest they talk to a professional who can help them, and if your company has an Employee Assistance Program, direct them there.

We are all human, and of course, we should show compassion and understanding when a co-worker needs a sympathetic ear. However, we need to be prepared to redirect an employee when we are not the correct person to handle the information. If a manager or co-worker does inadvertently become involved in another employee’s personal challenge, a very clear line must be drawn between job performance and personal issues. The only criteria for employment actions such as promotion, training, termination or suspension, must be results, performance, and ability.

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

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