



Supervisor Newsletter

The July *Supervisor Training Newsletter* covered termination of problem employees. This issue will focus on firing an unpredictable and potentially violent individual.

Firing a Volatile Employee

The correlation between substance abuse and violent behavior has been well-documented. More than 75% of people who begin treatment for drug addiction report having performed various acts of violence, including using a weapon to attack another person.

When an employee has tested positive on a workplace drug test and is going to be terminated, there is always the possibility of a violent reaction. It is important, then, for supervisors to ensure their own protection and the protection of coworkers when engaging in the termination process. Companies have been sued for not taking the necessary precautions before firing a potentially violent person.

Doing everything possible to prevent an incident of workplace violence through the use of best hiring practices, drug free workplace programs, and instituting a policy of zero-tolerance for violence are the first steps in avoiding a problem. But with the widespread use of drugs combined with an increase in mental health problems, even the best, well-enforced company policies can sometimes fail.

So, what can supervisors do to help mitigate the risks involved in terminating an employee who might react in a violent manner? It begins with having a plan in place designed to reduce the risk of violence. The plan should include:

- Reviewing all employee handbooks, policy, and procedure manuals before the termination.

- Conducting a threat assessment that includes an updated criminal record check on the employee.
- Using a neutral manager or outside security consultant to carry out the termination.
- Allowing the person to maintain as much dignity as possible, while still being brief and to the point.
- Emphasizing severance benefits and any outsourcing help that may be available.
- Having security on standby during the termination meeting.
- Not allowing the employee to “take a break” and go to his vehicle or desk during the termination meeting.
- Not allowing the employee to revisit the workplace.

Warning Signs

Of course, not every employee who tests positive for drugs will react in a violent way when terminated. But there are some warning signs and red flags that supervisors should be aware of:

- Has the individual been accused of having a poor attitude with coworkers?
- Has he or she expressed feelings of paranoia or persecution?
- Has the employee been showing signs of acute stress, depression, or anger?
- Have there been recent serious issues such as death of a loved one or divorce in the employee’s life?

- Has the employee been recently arrested or charged with a crime?
- Has he or she exhibited a fascination with weapons or recent violent events in the news?

Other indicators that an employee might react violently to being fired would be if coworkers have reported that the person's behavior has been strange or threatening, and/or if there has been a history of complaints to management from the employee himself or herself.

Staying Safe

If, as a supervisor or manager, you find yourself in the unenviable position of having to fire an employee that you suspect might react violently, there are some actions you can take to reduce the risk:

- Have a witness in the room who is neutral to the situation. Never let anyone be involved in the termination meeting who has been an object of the employee's threats.
- Be sure to give the employee specific reasons for the termination that focus on the most serious act or acts of policy violations. Don't give the employee false hope that the decision can be reversed.
- Be direct and professional, but compassionate. Don't do anything to make the employee think your actions are based on your personal feelings toward him or her.
- Tell the employee how future job reference inquiries will be handled,

and in doing so, be careful to not take away all sense of hope.

- If benefits counseling is made available by the company, ensure that the employee knows how to access the assistance.
- When possible, terminate the employee at the end of a shift. Don't allow him or her to go back and interact with other employees.
- Tell the employee that his/her personal belongings will be collected and sent to his/her home.
- If possible, allow the employee to resign rather than be terminated, and even offer a small severance package if the company allows.

Getting Help

It is always best, whenever possible, to allow trained security personnel to handle any termination that could result in violence. These professionals often have years of experience interviewing and controlling violent offenders. But for most managers, utilizing internal security or outside consultants is not possible simply because they are not made available as an option by the company. Local police, however, will always dispatch an officer to stand by during a potentially violent termination meeting if requested to do so. Not responding to such a request would create enormous liability for law enforcement if violence did erupt. A manager should never hesitate to ask the police for assistance if he or she is concerned about the outcome of a termination meeting.