



Termination With Dignity

How many of our Human Resource representatives or Managers ever give a minute's thought to how to conduct a termination? Do we ever think about what is going on in that employee's mind and how what we say and the events that follow may affect them? Is there such a thing as termination with dignity?

These are some very weighty questions. Our experience has been that very little consideration is given to the way a person is terminated, even in the case of a potentially violent person. A cursory attempt is made to provide a secure environment for those conducting the termination. Many times, there is no concern for the feelings of the person being terminated because they were a "problem employee", they weren't very friendly or they had a personality issue. Many more times, those attributes of their personalities were not identified to management until an event occurred that escalated out of control. All that matters to those conducting a termination is to get it over with. It's uncomfortable so let's get it over with quickly.

So how do we conduct a termination in such a way that a person's job is taken from them but they get to keep their dignity? After all, many who have committed workplace violence have confessed that their dignity was taken from them and they felt they were left with no other option. We call this a trigger, but more on that later. So, before we look at how to conduct a termination meeting, let's look at what is going on in the person's head.

David Weaver, author of "Battling the Inner Dummy," in conjunction with Dr. Gilbert Heftner, Associate Professor of Chemical Psychology, Northern University, put forth the hypothesis that the mind has two separate functioning parts, one rational (EGO); the other irrational/instinctive/emotional (ID). The ID has no concept of logic, time or awareness. It is referred to as the limbic brain found in animals and is thought to be the part of the human brain that predominated during early man. It functions as a survival mechanism.

When a trigger is set in play, such as being told you are being terminated, some people will react rationally; they will be clear thinking and logical. Others will react emotionally/instinctively to protect themselves. This is what is called a limbic hijacking. These people act totally irrational and will do or say something that they later regret. The reaction can vary from violently lashing out at those conducting the termination to an emotional display of self pity. Do these individuals hear much of what is said after they are informed of their termination? That depends if they have remained rational or if they are suffering from limbic hijacking. In the latter case, the answer is usually no.

Most individuals losing their jobs think only of what is going to happen next. Is my career over? Will I get a positive reference? Where will I go and what will I do? The



thoughts are usually negative. What needs to be done at this time is to put as much of a positive spin on this as possible.

Since the single biggest trigger of rampage-type attacks in the workplace, according to Steve Kaufer, CPP and Jerry W. Mattman, CPP, of the Workplace Violence Research Institute, is employee terminations, the process employed can make the difference between a routine event and a major crisis.

Procedures will vary based on the type of business and circumstances, but in general, the following should be considered:

- Terminate near the end of the week and end of the day/shift (not on a Friday)
- Have all termination paperwork ready and attempt to have the employee sign it at that time. Obtain keys, credit cards, cell phones, etc.
- Just prior to or during the termination change all access settings, codes and card access
- Have the employee escorted out of the building immediately after the termination meeting. Set up a time after everyone has left to have the employee return to retrieve personal items from the work area
- Do not make the termination meeting a discussion

What needs to be conveyed in the termination meeting is that this is not the end of the employment road for the employee. You must get them to understand and believe that there is a future for them. Offering an out-placement service helps reduce the stress and gives them hope.

The termination meeting should be conducted at the end of the work day and near the end of the work week, if possible. The employee should leave the building immediately after the exit interview is over, returning later at a pre-determined time to obtain all their personal items from the work area. One of the worst situations that can happen is to terminate an employee, then have them go to their workspace and retrieve their personal belongings with all their peers looking on. You have just taken their job, don't take their dignity.

When you take a person's dignity, they may feel that coming back to the work place with a weapon will even the playing field. Remember, their rational mind has been hijacked. They may feel that they have no other choice but to commit a violent act. They may feel they have nothing else to lose. In fact, interviews of individuals that have committed violent acts or taken others hostage, have conveyed that they felt they had been stripped of their dignity and had nothing to lose by inflicting violence on others.

By having the employee escorted from the building after the termination meeting, you preserve their dignity by not having them face their peers. Arranging for a time later that



day, after the other employees have left, allows them to spend their time collecting their personal items without contact with colleagues and the questions they may ask. There will be time for them to contact their friends later. Alternatively, some companies prefer to collect the employees' items and have them delivered to their address on record.

In the case of downsizing or a large number of lay-offs, upper level management should have a company meeting as soon as possible to explain what has happened. Do not leave this task to lower level managers. This must be addressed from the top. That is the only way employees will believe what is said. Put yourself in the position of an employee that has just seen or heard of 10-15 employees being terminated. What is going through their minds? Who's next, me? Will there be more terminations next week? Mid-level managers could be tasked to address this but employees will still wonder what upper level management is thinking. The longer they wait to address this problem, the more anxiety builds.

Employers should strive to hire, train, supervise and even discipline employees in a manner to preserve their dignity. By following the proper procedure, managers can terminate individuals with dignity.

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