



The Do's And Don'ts Of Laying Off Employees

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DURHAM, N.H. - As the economic downturn forces more companies to lay off workers, a workplace aggression expert at the University of New Hampshire cautions employers about what to do and not do when breaking bad news to employees.

Paul Harvey, assistant professor of management at UNH, says although there really is no good way to tell someone they are being laid off, employers should tailor the bad news in a way that minimizes the likelihood of an extremely bad reaction.

"Part of it is common sense and being respectful. One of my colleagues used to work for a company that decided it needed to downsize. The company took the bizarre step of announcing who would be laid off in stages, with each announcement coming on a Friday the 13th. This creates fear and tension among employees, and also creates an 'us vs. them' mentality. There weren't any disasters on that occasion, but it's not hard to imagine tensions boiling over," Harvey says.

Tensions boiled over recently at a Pennsylvania distribution center when a former employee who had been fired returned to the warehouse and killed two employees. The gunman told police that he had been harassed by co-workers.

Harvey says managers should try to understand an employee's personality and watch for a "hostile attribution style" -- people who have a tendency to blame others whenever things go wrong in their lives. These people usually are easy to identify: they never take responsibility for problems, frequently seek scapegoats, and tend to be angry frequently.

"If you need to lay this type of person off, it's important to be very explicit about why they were chosen and why this was a logical decision. If it's because of economic reasons, be very clear that it's because of economic reasons. Otherwise the tendency to believe 'they're out to get me' often takes over," Harvey says.

Even if an employer believes an employee is a calm and reasonable person, Harvey cautions that it's best to be as candid as possible and explain all the reasons a person is being laid off, even if it's a bit awkward.

"One of the worst things you can do is create ambiguity. While the managers might think they are sparing feelings, they are also giving ex-employees an opportunity to spin conspiracy theories which fuel anger and resentment. Be kind and respectful, but also as candid as possible," he says.

Even if no layoffs are planned, the economic downturn and less job security can lead to more work-related stress, which is compounded by worries about increasing cost of food and fuel, and the housing and credit crises. An overall increase in stress raises the potential for more workplace aggression, such as yelling at co-workers and threatening them with violence. Increased stress also can translate into alcohol abuse, depression, withdrawal from work and family, and even suicide.

"A big problem with these reactions is that they don't always go away once the stress is reduced. People become addicted to alcohol or irreparably harm their reputation at work or their relationships with family members. Fortunately the really dramatic stress-related incidents, like workplace shootings, are rare," Harvey says.

Harvey suggests employers understand the difference between "good" stress and "bad" stress. Good stress challenges employees with reasonable goals and rewards for completing tasks. Bad stress, such as very tight deadlines, arcane policies and uncomfortable working conditions, can lead to reduced productivity and should be kept at a minimum.

"Reducing bad stress often can be done by reducing bureaucracy and listening to employees' concerns to see if they can be addressed. What you generally don't want to do is try to reduce employees overall stress levels by taking away the good stress, the aspects of a job they find enjoyable and energizing," he says.

And when possible, employers should try to be vaguely aware of what employees are dealing with in their personal lives, whether it's the loss of a home, death of a loved one, or a divorce. People have different levels of coping ability, but everyone has a breaking point.

"While you can't really make a habit out of letting employees shirk their duties at work every time they have a personal problem, any steps that can be taken to reduce the bad stress these employees have to deal with will go a long way toward helping them ride out a tough time," Harvey says.

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