

Zero-tolerance policies: an open door to trouble?

On paper, zero-tolerance policies seem like a good idea: You warn employees that your organization will not tolerate even one instance of on-the-job misconduct. But life isn't always so simple.

The problem: Zero-tolerance policies may be vague and hard to interpret.

And that can lead to a wrongful discharge lawsuit. Use these four guidelines to develop and enforce a zero-tolerance policy:

Tackle only the worst behaviors. It's not worth the threat of going to court for minor employee indiscretions.

Zero in on the most egregious behaviors, such as violence, theft and harassment. Just make sure you define them extensively.

Be specific. Specify the behaviors you won't tolerate. Don't just say, "We will not tolerate violence." Say, "Physical violence, including hitting, kicking and threats with weapons, will result in automatic suspension pending a full investigation."

Describe how you will conduct that investigation.

Be consistent. Enforce your policy equally at all levels. Don't favor valued employees over poor performers. Treat all cases the same. Develop a checklist for investigating complaints and follow it rigorously in every case.

Be prepared to follow through. A zero-tolerance policy can spell consequences for the organization as well as the employee involved.

Make sure your top execs understand and support the downside: They may have to fire otherwise good employees, possibly sparking morale problems.