

On the emotional edge: 4 tips for responding to employee rants



Disciplinary and termination meetings are emotionally charged events that carry the potential for nasty words, hurt feelings and even legal troubles.

You never know how employees will respond to discipline or firings. But you need to be prepared for anything—including employees who “let it all out” in long, loud rants. Some employees simply vent, cry or complain without pouring their scorn on management. Other employees scream, insult, curse, threaten—or even get physical.

In either case, it’s wise to follow these four do’s and don’ts to defuse rants and avoid lawsuits:

1. DO listen

Avoid arguing with the employee, becoming defensive or taking the rant personally. Let the person speak his or her piece. Don’t interrupt or try to silence the employee—that can strip away the person’s dignity. This is especially important in termination meetings. Experts say that fired employees who don’t feel they were heard or who feel a loss of dignity are more likely to file lawsuits.

2. DO document the rant

It’s best to have a witness (another HR rep or a manager) in any meeting that could turn confrontational. Then, take notes right after. Make a written record of any insulting words, facial expressions, hand gestures, mood, voice volume and tone.

Notes are important because an angry employee may say something that contradicts a lawsuit he or she files

later. Or the employee may neglect to complain about something that later serves as a basis for a lawsuit.

3. DON'T ignore complaints that could lead to lawsuits

For example, somewhere in the middle of her tirade, the employee drops this bomb: "My supervisor is a sexist pig," and then she continues yelling about something else.

A court could say that such a comment served as official "notice" of potential sexual harassment and, therefore, the organization must investigate.

In such a case, calmly say, "Tell me about your supervisor." Take complete notes, and prepare to investigate any allegations. If the employee doesn't want to further explain the complaint about the supervisor, make a note of that, too.

Key point: Don't assume that claims of harassment or discrimination from ranting employees are false and result only from their anger. Employers have the same responsibility to investigate, regardless of the employees' tones.

4. DON'T tolerate threats

If the employee becomes verbally abusive or even hints at physical violence, leave the room and call for help to escort the person off the premises. Write down exactly what happened and how it made you feel, especially if you felt fear.

How to handle employees with attitude problems

When employees go off, protect yourself with these five steps:

1. **Put problem people in perspective.** Don't take their antics personally.
2. **Cool off.** You can't concentrate on constructive, creative alternatives while you're clinging to anger.
3. **Give and request frequent feedback.** Don't stew over what an employee may be thinking. Ask.
4. **Choose face-to-face talks in private** to discuss an employee's attitude or behavior.
5. **Keep a record** of all communications to prevent lies or faulty recollections from taking over later.