

# Lessons of a Giant \$1.5M Theft: How to Handle Sticky-Fingered Staff

Remember the heroes of last year's World Series-winning San Francisco Giants team—Buster Posey, Tim Lincecum, Brian Wilson ... Robin O'Connor.

Don't remember Ms. O'Connor? The Giants' \$80,000-a-year payroll manager must have played a pivotal role in the Series because she got a huge bonus—\$1,513,836 between June 2010 and June 2011, according to [KGO-TV in San Francisco](#).



In reality, that compensation was all her imagination. According to a federal [affidavit](#), O'Connor embezzled that money from the players' paychecks. She was [fired](#) in July after working for the team for four years.

O'Connor got caught when, in the process of applying for a home loan, she forged a letter from the Giants' HR director that said she was given extra compensation last year "because of her outstanding contributions ... that assisted us in accomplishing our goal of winning the 2010 World Series." The jig was up when the lender sent a copy of the letter to the Giants for confirmation.

## How would you handle a suspected embezzler?

When organizations suspect an employee of theft, they need to walk a careful line, balancing the rights of the employee while protecting the organization. Here are four tips to keep in mind:

- 1. Zip your lip until the investigation is complete.** Warn all managers who are aware of the investigation to avoid making any accusations. Tell them not to discuss the case with other employees. The employee could use such accusations to later sue your organization for slander or libel.
- 2. Consider hiring a security consultant to aid the investigation.** Security firms can provide tools and techniques that can build a concrete case against an employee. Using an outside firm limits the potential for wrongful-termination claims.
- 3. Word termination reasoning carefully.** Don't let managers tell anyone that the person is being fired for "theft." Instead, simply say the person violated a specific company policy.



For example, say a manager sees an employee withdrawing cash from a petty-cash drawer. If the manager cites

"stealing from the cash drawer" as the reason for termination, the employee may be able to argue in a wrongful-termination suit that he was unjustly accused because he or she was simply taking money to buy office supplies. Instead, make clear that the employee was fired for "failing to follow written policy regarding obtaining permission to access the cash draw." Record the reason in the employee's personnel file.

Remind managers, even after the employee leaves, not to discuss the termination details with other employees.

**4. Encourage execs to file a police report.** Too many businesses shy away from doing so because they fear negative publicity or the disruption of a police investigation.

Many also believe that reported cases go nowhere. Not true: In fact, 82% of employee theft cases referred to the police either end in guilty pleas or successful convictions, according to the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners. Plus, failing to file a police report sends the message that nothing will happen if employees steal. And it allows the person to commit similar crimes at another business.