

Lessons From Strip-Search Case: Train Managers on 'Dignity'

When managers suspect theft, it's easy for tempers to rise. But don't allow the incident to erupt into an ugly confrontation and public humiliation of employees. Establish a policy on treating co-workers with dignity, then periodically remind employees about it.

For example, resist the urge to lock the doors and refuse to let anyone leave until you recover missing money or goods. False accusations can sting and lead to lawsuits for "false imprisonment" and emotional distress.

Recent case: Ciera Ridgeway and several other women worked at a Bob Evans restaurant with assistant manager Patricia Carlisle. Just before Christmas, Carlisle borrowed a diamond ring, bracelet and earrings from another employee to wear to a holiday party. The jewelry disappeared from the manager's office.

Police were called to the scene, but refused Carlisle's suggestion to strip-search all the employees. Then she told the employees to go into the ladies room and strip or she wouldn't allow them to leave. They complied.

When management found out, they fired Carlisle for violating the company's conduct rule: to treat all employees with dignity. The employees sued Bob Evans anyway, alleging false imprisonment and emotional distress.

The Ohio Court of Appeals dismissed the case. It concluded that since the missing property didn't belong to Bob Evans, Carlisle wasn't acting on behalf of her employer when she demanded the strip search. Plus, it helped that Bob Evans fired her right away. (*Bauman, Ridgeway, et al. v. Bob Evans Farms*, No. 06AP-737, Court of Appeals of Ohio, 2007)