

Crude, foul-mouthed manager can easily spark a lawsuit

HR professionals beware: Foul-mouthed managers are trouble, and the best policy is zero tolerance. If verbal abuse creates a hostile environment for employees and an employee calls a manager out on the obnoxious barrage, you could face a messy lawsuit.

What's the best way to handle a complaint? Practice tough love. Put a quick stop to generally offensive and unnecessary social commentary by enforcing civility standards from the top down.

Recent case: Michele Russo complained to higher-ups that her immediate supervisor (a female) made offensive and "racist" comments, including crude sexual references about Jewish people, Asian people and the Indonesia tsunami victims.

After the higher-ups talked to Russo's supervisor about the complaint, the supervisor returned and angrily told Russo that she'd have to work on her terms, and she wanted to speak "without thinking someone was keeping a file on" her. A month later, the supervisor fired Russo.

Russo sued, alleging the firing was due to her opposing an illegal practice. The court ordered a trial even though it wasn't convinced the supervisor's tirades were illegal since they didn't target specific employees. But Russo was protected from retaliation for making a good-faith complaint. (*Nicolosi-Russo v. Program Brokerage Corp.*, No. 05-9373, SD NY, 2006)

Final tip: Your organization's corporate image can suffer irreparable damage from just one lawsuit or news report. Don't risk it. Stamp out rude and crude behavior before it ends up on the front page.