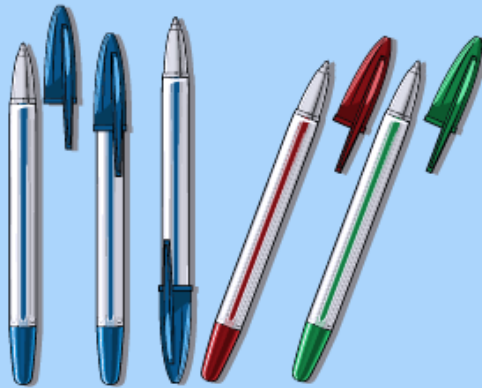


'Where did all the pens go?' Getting a handle on petty theft



A pen here, a stack of Post-It notes there—employees bringing home items from work for personal use or to supplement their kid's school box may not initially seem like a big deal. But think for a moment about multiple individuals repeatedly swiping things, and it's easy to see how a costly mess can develop quickly.

Why workers take items

What makes people who wouldn't dream of shoplifting a ream of paper from the local Office Depot think your supply closet is fair game?

Takers often don't equate what they're doing with stealing. Though an occasional employee may grab a big-ticket item (believe it or not, some companies have reported instances of chair theft), most things that make their way out the door are relatively inexpensive and easy to hide. The act becomes rationalized as "no big deal," especially if stealers know colleagues do the same and the odds of getting caught are slim.

But don't discount the possibility that this petty theft has a deeper basis than convenience.

"Most employees steal office supplies because they feel like trust has been broken," says Melina Gillies, HR specialist at SalesUp! Business Coaching. "The series of promises employees feel were made to them about their job and work environment, what we like to call the 'psychological contract,' were not fulfilled in some way, which leads to discontent. That discontent spurs a feeling of getting even, even if they meet the broken trust of their employer with untrustworthy behavior of their own—and it's a red flag for any organization that something in the culture is broken."

Thus, managers who notice a rise in missing supplies may want to investigate team morale. Staplers leaving the office may turn out to be the least of the company's problems if indicative of the same disengagement and frustration that leads to reduced output and increased turnover.

Prevention

Beyond improving employee relations so that workers don't feel justified to "create their own benefits," plenty of other actions can help limit pilfering.

"Smaller orders on demand instead of maintaining a large stockpile of supplies and ensuring high-priced items have restricted access of some sort are important measures that can be taken," Gillies says. "A word to the wise, however, is knowing which high-priced items are worth being locked up. If an employee needs to ask permission to receive a new box of staples, this could increase the discontent and lead to a feeling of micro-management."

Other tactics to try include:

- Demonstrating that management is aware of the problem and keeping an eye on the situation through statements at a staff meeting or in a company newsletter.
- Posting a sign in the supply area reminding everyone that materials are for work use only.
- Creating a sheet for monitoring inventory that lists items on hand and requires employees to sign and date next to what they're removing from stock.
- Holding a "restock event" once a week in which the office manager opens the locked supply area for workers to come over and request specific items.
- Developing a tip line where workers can leave anonymous comments about suspicious behavior (and other workplace problems, for that matter).
- Asking employees for their suggestions on how to curb missing supplies.

Or consider drawing interest in the matter through something that always perks up ears—money.

"Many experts show that attaching some portion of your employees' compensation to overall performance metrics (such as yearly profit margin and overall business revenue) allows them to take ownership of how the business runs and its success," says Matthew Struck, partner and co-founder of Treadstone Risk Management. "Business supply theft is indirectly inhibited because it impacts the profitability of the organization and thus hurts the employees in the long-run."

When people see disappearing printer ink cartridges as affecting their potential earnings, they become less tolerant of a colleague's behavior. And getting the team actively invested in looking for ways to save money and increase profits may ultimately do more than solve the case of the sticky-fingered staff member—it may create the type of dedication to company success that eliminates the desire to steal from the employer in the first place.