Terminating Employees: Ten Tips On Firing Employees

From the Braun Consulting Newsletter, Spring 2006

**Terminating Employees: Ten Tips On Firing**

 **A Few Words About Terminating Employees**

 We need to start this article by saying that in over 35 years of working

 with employers we have never met a supervisor that actually liked or

 enjoyed terminating employees. An involuntary termination of employment is

 a double failure since it shows that the employee could not meet the needs

 and expectations of the employer and it also demonstrates that the

 employer may not have done what was needed in the hiring process and in

 managing the person once hired.

 The tips in this article are practical tips, and apply only after the

 decision has been fully made to fire an employee. This is not about the

 process leading up to the firing, or the aftermath. It is about the actual

 "termination" itself.

 **Tip 1 - Get Help: Utilize The Backing Of Your Organization**

 Your Human Resources department and your supervisor should be consulted

 and utilized as much as possible during this entire process. Seek out and

 use any help that is available and appropriate within your organization.

 For example, it is usually best to have the help of another person during

 the actual termination interview. They should be present to be a witness

 and to take notes. Their primary purpose for being there is to observe and

 document the proceedings, but they may also be there to lend support, if

 necessary, in the appropriate manner decided upon in advance.

 Offer the employee who is going to be notified of the decision an

 opportunity to have someone with them at the meeting if that is practical

 given the circumstances. The more comfortable everyone can be the better

 off everyone will be.

 If security is a potential issue be sure to utilize any security personnel

 you may have in your organization. If there are no security personnel at

 your job site then have a plan for others to be available to help you if

 necessary. Have them close by but not in the meeting room. This is not a

 courtroom where the decision is handed down and then the person is hauled

 off. Remember to protect the self-respect of the employee being

 terminated.

 **Tip 2 - Plan The Logistics: Where, When, How Long, Etc.**

 The planning and preparation for the termination meeting should include

 all of the logistical elements that will come into play.

 Here are some of the most important that should be considered:

 Where: Where will the meeting be held?

 Tip: A neutral location is best. Not in your office, not in theirs, not in

 public. A neutral conference room, meeting room, or unoccupied lunchroom

 etc. is usually the best. Schedule the time and make sure there are no

 conflicts in the schedule.

 When: What time of day and what day of the week?

 Tip: Advice varies, but many professionals agree that the meeting should

 probably take place in the early to late afternoon (but not at the end of

 the day) and in the middle of the week. Try to hold the termination

 meeting at a time and location that will not parade the employee through

 the job site at a peak period.

 Mid-week terminations will allow the employee to reach out for legal or

 other advice they may need to help them cope during the week. It will not

 leave them in a situation where they are facing a weekend of going over

 things in their mind without being able to seek help.

 Note: Avoid firings around holidays or birthdays etc. Unless it is

 critical the employee move on. Waiting a day or so will reduce the trauma

 or the termination.

 How Long: How long will the meeting last?

 Tip: Between 5 and 15 minutes is considered optimal. The purpose of this

 meeting is to inform the employee of the decision, not to debate it or

 review it. If the basic information is prepared in advance, including

 written materials, then the job can be done in a relatively short period

 of time. Most professionals agree that shorter is better.

 If the employee wants to debate the decision ask them to use the grievance

 procedure or to write you a letter after they have thought it over for a

 day or so. No in-person debates, but a letter lets them have their "last

 word" if that will help them get through the process.

 Who Will Be There?

 Tip: Try to get another supervisor or HR person to be in attendance as a

 witness and to take contemporaneous notes. No groups - a limit of

 four is appropriate.

 Getting In And Out: How will I arrive at and leave the meeting?

 Tip: Try to make sure that you can exit the interview gracefully and at

 the time of your own choosing. You don't want to be stuck in a situation

 where the employee won't leave when you want them to, or where you have to

 walk out of a situation where things have not been resolved and you have

 to "escape". Plan what you will do when it is time to leave and stick with the plan.

 **Tell the employee up front that you have another appointment in about 15**

 **minutes.**  Inform them that you wanted them to be treated with respect by a

 prompt notification of the decision. Again, invite the employee to write

 you a letter or use the grievance process if they wish to vent.

 What Happens With The Employee: Where will they go after the interview?

 Tip: Have a plan for where the employee will go or what they will do after

 the interview. If there is a security risk prepare for the necessary

 precautions, such as having the person escorted off the premises. If there

 is no security risk consider whether the person will leave the job site

 immediately, or whether they will gather their belongings etc. from their

 work location.

 Follow your organization's procedures to the letter. Don't leave the

 employee hanging and have a detailed plan in place for

 their activity after the interview. Ask them if they would like some help

 from another employee of their choosing with final tasks, and if they do

 make it happen.

**Tip 3 - Expect The Unexpected**

 In preparing for the interview, go over anything you can think of that

 might throw you for a loop. Try to anticipate any questions and prepare your answers - then think of

 any crazy or off the wall comments, questions, or behaviors you might get.

 If you go throughpossible scenarios you will feel more comfortable facing

 this situation.

 Think about what can go wrong, and how to diffuse it.

 Here are some examples:

 The employee starts to cry.

 The employee will not answer a question.

 The employee continually "does not understand".

 The employee "demands" to talk to someone else.

 The employee stands up or starts to walk around.

 The employee threatens you.

 The employee will not listen to you.

 Ideally termination should never come as a surprise to the employee, and

 this should reduce the risk of unexplained or unanticipated behavior.

 However, part of being prepared, both psychologically and physically, is

 to know what you would do if the "unexpected" happens.

**Tip 4 - Prepare Yourself Emotionally**

 Firing or terminating an employee is not only stressful for the employee;

 it is stressful for the employer or supervisor as well. If you are

 conducting a termination meeting be prepared for your own emotional state

 before, during, and after the meeting.

 Before the meeting allow some time to review your notes and get yourself

 together emotionally. Breathe fully, try to relax, and set up your

 expectation to succeed.

 It is best to contain regret, anger, frustration, sadness, or other

 emotions. Stick to the tone and purpose of this meeting, both factually

 and emotionally.

 Prepare yourself to respond so that if the employee gets argumentative or

 defensive that you keep your responses measured and factual.

 If possible, prepare to observe your own emotions and behavior during the

 meeting and use it as a learning experience.

 Don't schedule highly taxing or demanding jobs right after this

 meeting, and don't expect to be at your peak. It may be easier if you know

 in advance that you have a reward coming for a job well done.

 Allow yourself time to process your own emotions and the results of the

 meeting without being rushed or distracted. Briefly express your emotion

 to a fellow supervisor since verbalizing will often help move the emotions

 along (Boy I hate this part of my job etc.).

**Tip 5 - Control The Interview**

From the moment you contact the employee for the interview until the

 moment you depart your goal should be to control the interview. By

 "control" we mean that you direct the course of the interview and dictate

 its timing and outcome.

 Of course this is idealized. If you are lucky and well prepared the

 interview will go according to plan and you will be in control. If the

 interview goes off the rails it is because you let it.

 You have covered the logistical elements in your preparation for the

 interview so this should go a long way towards controlling the interview.

 However, there are other elements that are involved in keeping control of

 the interview such as the following:

 Decide what "tone" will you set and stick to it. It is usually advisable

 to set a positive tone if possible. This means that you can present the

 situation (in your overall tone, tone of voice, choice of words, etc.) as

 one of a necessary decision that is the best for both parties (since you

 know work has not been going well for some time etc.). If the employee

 does not agree with this, you can still maintain that "tone" for the

 meeting anyway and still maintain control of this factor throughout the

 meeting. A firm but courteous tone is often the most effective under the

 circumstances. Do not be distracted from your "script" of how the meeting

 must progress.

 Decide how much time will be spent on each segment of the interview.

 Allocate a certain amount of time for each part of the interview, such as

 the introductory words you use, the time spent on signing any papers or

 discussing any documentation involved, and how long you allow the employee

 to talk in any given segment.

 Decide how to end the interview. If possible, conclude the meeting with

 a handshake and a sincere wish that the employee will do well in the

 future. You can also reaffirm your organization's willingness to provide

 transition tools to the employee if appropriate.

 Decide in advance that you will be prepared and do your best to maintain

 control throughout the interview. Be open to the possibility that things

 may not go exactly as you planned them to, but expect to succeed.

**Tip 6 - Give Clear Explanations**

 Make sure that any release or other paperwork involved with the

 termination is written in plain, understandable language.

 If documents are written in confusing legal jargon it is still necessary

 for the employee to fully understand it.

 Always tell the employee that a confirming letter will follow regarding

 any benefits since major "he said - she said" misunderstandings can occur

 at stressful meetings such as one for termination of employment.

 Most people will be in an emotional state and their grasp on details and

 memory will probably not be at their peak.

 This is one of the reasons that it is important both psychologically and

 legally to present information in a clear and unambiguous way. Doing so

 also tends to "ground" the situation and keep a rational and decisive tone

 to the information and its presentation.

**Tip 7 - Be Professional**

While you can't control an employee's actions, you can maintain a positive

 and professional attitude that may help prevent any bitterness.

 Keeping the tone of a termination meeting positive can avoid creating a

 tense atmosphere that may make your employee resentful and more likely to

 resort to (at best) legal action or (at worst) a hostile rampage.

 Have everything ready and in order, and move smoothly from one part of the

 meeting to the next.

 Be organized and follow a script if possible.

 Have all paperwork ready to sign, a check for the employee if appropriate,

 and all logistical elements in line ready to go. Don't forget that letter

 confirming what post employment benefits the employee will be eligible

 for. Make it clear that only items in the letter are available in post

 employment. Being prepared and keeping a controlled and respectful tone will likely be

 the most important elements in conducting yourself professionally in a

 termination meeting.

**Tip 8 - Respond To The Employee As A Person**

 Don't overlook the fact that you are dealing with a person in a

 potentially volatile situation. Being prepared helps, that way you can

 look at the other person and respond appropriately to however they might

 react. Think about THEM, and not strictly about what YOU are going to do or are

 doing. Think about the employee as a person. Look the employee in the eye. Watch your tone of

 voice when speaking. Take time to listen to what they say and pause before you speak in

 response.

 Even though you are in control of the interview, respond appropriately

 based on the situation, not just what you have in your plan. You can be

 compassionate, yet forceful, and you can be empathetic without being

 apologetic.

 Remember, you are dealing with a person, another human being. It is often

 our tendency to make someone or something an abstraction if we are trying

 to remove ourselves from a difficult situation and this can lead to

 shutting the other person out, or not being responsive to their actual

 behavior.

 Try not to let the unpleasantness of the situation lead to treating the

 employee as an abstraction, or a nuisance. When they are in front of you in this meeting do your

 best to treat them like a human being who deserves your respect and humanity.

**Tip 9 - Review Your Performance And Move On.**

 After you have completed terminating the employee you can review the

 situation and your own performance. Whatever happened in this whole process

 you can learn from it and move on. Assess the situation and how you did, and

 incorporate what you learned into your arsenal of skills to use in the future.

 Talk to your colleagues, supervisor or a group of other managers to

 debrief. This will give you a chance to talk about the feelings that you

 experienced and to hear the reactions of the others involved.

**Tip 10 - Some Do's And Don'ts**

 Here are a few more suggested "Do's" for terminating an employee:

 Terminate in the first ten minutes of the conversation. Avoid a long

 build-up to soften the blow because this will often only confuse and

 cloud the message.

 Be clear and answer questions. Make sure the employee understands that

 they're being terminated. Once you've explained the situation, let the

 employee ask questions.

 Let your employee respond. Let the employee speak their mind.

 End on a positive note. Thank the employee for their contributions and

 wish them luck in the future. When the meeting is over, stand up and

 shake their hand.

 Rehearse what you will say and how you conduct the meeting if possible.

 Put yourself in the employee's shoes, then do what you feel is right.

 Specify clearly why the employee is being terminated and the effective

 date and time of the termination.

 Inform the employee of any rights or entitlements that they may have

 coming.

 Ensure the return of any property that is the employer’s.

 Cover all areas of security, including computer passwords, access to

 company property or data, and physical security of the job site and

 other employees.

 Document the termination conference.

Here are a few more suggested "Dont's" for terminating an employee:

 Don't give employees false hope and say you'll help them find a job.

 Don't say, "I'm sure your not going to have any trouble."

 Don't pass the buck and say this firing was not your idea.

 Don't give platitudes and say, "You'll feel better when you sleep on

 it."

 Don't say, "I feel really bad about this." Saying these things only

 makes the situation worse

 Don't get defensive.

 Don't interrupt, contradict or try to defend yourself or the company.

 Arguing will only create resentment and frustration on the part of the

 employee.

 Don't assess blame or make apologies. There's no reason to blame the

 employee or the company for the termination. Just explain that the

 company's needs don't match the employee's particular skills.

 Don't apologize. You can express regret that the employment relationship

 didn't work out, but don't apologize.

 Don't debate with the employee. Give honest answers, but don't debate.

 Don't take responsibility for the failure. You may want to simply

 express regret that the opportunity did not work out.

 Don't offer advice. Listen respectfully, but don't offer advice or

 recriminations.

 Don't discuss the termination with anyone other than the employee and

 those directly involved.

 Site by - AJ Consulting / © 2006 Braun Consulting Group