Managing Whiners and Complainers: How to Handle Disgruntled Employees

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Almost every workplace has one - the disgruntled employee who frequently complains to supervisors and co-workers. Complaints might range from workload (too much, too little), supervisory style (too demanding, too lenient), co-workers (lazy or harassing), pay (always too low), tools (too primitive, too complicated), etc. Such an employee typically causes disruption and dissension in the workplace and requires an inordinate amount of managerial attention.

The law in recent years has grown to protect many forms of employee complaints. For example, the law regarding sexual and other forms of harassment requires employers to institute policies that encourage employees to complain if they feel they are being harassed. Likewise, various "whistleblower" laws protect employees who complain about unsafe working conditions, illegal practices, and the like.

Employers are not helpless against chronic complainers, however, although caution is necessary. The best tool for addressing disruptive behavior is a comprehensive code of conduct contained in an employee manual. Rules against insubordination and discourtesy to supervisors, co-workers and customers should be included. Employees who violate these rules should receive a written warning initially and more serious forms of discipline if the misconduct continues.

Whiners and complainers should be dealt with promptly and decisively. When the complaints interfere with productivity or employee morale they should be addressed. When the complaining involves misconduct or disruption and is not protected, it should be the subject of discipline. If it continues, termination of the disgruntled employee may be the only way to prevent the dissension and malaise from spreading throughout the workforce.

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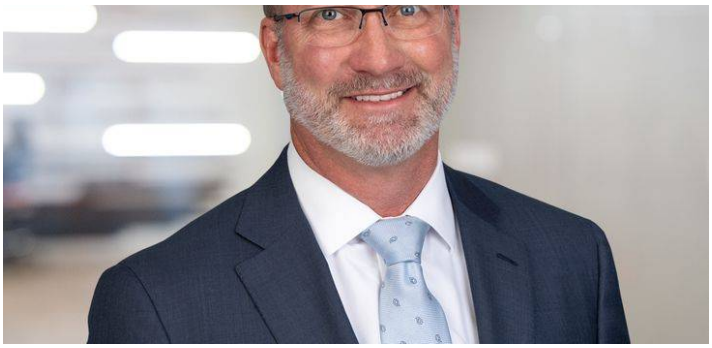

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