



Should HR Sit In On a Termination?

Insights

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A senior HR professional recently posed this good question on a Linked In Forum. As with many good questions, the answer is that “it depends on the facts.” Here are a few initial observations before we get to the central question. . . .

1. A process should be in place so that HR is aware of the termination.
2. Processes should also be in place to ensure that the supervisor’s boss or someone else in management has to approve a termination; even routine. Even in large companies, we learn of terminations carried out without oversight by frontline or site supervision.
3. Train “everyone who fires” to recognize that small percentage of potential “problem” discharges, and to contact HR.
4. Even better, build a culture where supervisors contact HR on a regular basis and not only when terminating an employee.

If the above steps are followed, hopefully HR or additional management is already involved in problem discharges. I consider the following factors in whether it is wise to involve HR in the termination meeting.

1. How strong are the “people” and supervisory skills of the person handling the termination? Lawsuits sometimes occur because of the way a termination meeting is handled. Even if the termination presents no meaningful legal risk, coworkers and potential hires will hear about shabby treatment at termination.
2. Who will explain benefits, confidentiality and other “housekeeping” matters?
3. How high up is the employee and are there complex confidentiality, non-competition or customer issues?
4. Will the terminating supervisor keep adequate notes and complete forms?
5. What is the most professional and “decent” way to handle the meeting? Even when the soon-to-be ex employee (hopefully working for a competitor soon) is a truly sorry human being, nothing is gained by treating the person badly at discharge.

Notwithstanding these considerations, I prefer someone to always sit in on a termination, and often that person is from HR. Why?

1. To monitor personnel actions and to strive for consistent corporate behavior, or document when deviations are necessary.
2. Regardless of the routine nature of a termination, lawyers hate inheriting “he said – she said” situations. I like a witness to what the terminating manager testifies.
3. The HR professional may quite frankly be good at handling discharges, although I am not sure that they will revel in the role of everyone’s favorite executioner.
4. Employers seldom get much from exit interviews, or even persuade departing employees to complete an exit interview, which is a shame. Employers often learn of theft, drug issues, discrimination and harassment occurring at the site when a teed off soon-to-be-former employee lets loose in the exit interview. Remember the Memorex commercial where the sound is blowing the listener back into his seat? Of course, sadly, that analogy presupposes that you remember cassette tapes. Maybe such information flows better with HR present, or with an additional manager present.
5. Sometimes an upper level manager or HR member is required to not –so-subtly send a message, positive or negative.
6. To handle the increasingly vital effort to protect data from walking out the door.
7. To better train supervisors who may seldom terminate an employee and probably have not received much training on how to do so.
8. Finally, if a termination is for rule breaking, attitude, or performance, is a termination ever truly “routine?”

As a parting recommendation, don't terminate someone "virtually" as occurred in the outstanding movie, [Up In the Air](#), even if you are as nice as Anna Kendrick ([see clip](#)).

One of these days, I am going to teach an MBA-level course using "Up In the Air" and "[Office Space](#)" as my source material!

What do you think?

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