

Consider Your Safety When Doing Terminations

In wake of a stabbing spree, an HR professional and police officer discuss ways to minimize risks

By Lauren Chesney

If you're like most HR Professionals, you probably try to bend over backwards when preparing for an employee termination. You ensure the package is fair and the paperwork is complete, the employee's manager is prepared — she or he knows what to say, what not to say and when and how to make a graceful exit — and you've planned the meeting in such a way as to reduce the discomfort of the departing employee as much as possible.

If you're like most HR professionals, you've studied the termination package to ensure you can answer any questions the employee may have.

You've probably tried not to think too much about how the meeting could go wrong. And you're probably dreading what you are about to do.

But you haven't done your due diligence if you haven't also considered your safety.

Employees at any organization represent society and, therefore, we can expect them to reflect both the good and the bad of society. We can expect that sometimes good people will make bad decisions and some people may struggle to control their emotions when under pressure. We can expect there may be people whose reaction to losing their jobs may be unpredictable and possibly violent.

One of the most dangerous things you can do, in planning a termination, is to underestimate the possibility of a violent incident occurring.

Is it statistically unlikely? Sure. But it only has to happen once. Taking the time to consider these possibilities and take some simple precautions is a small investment of time and effort. Being fearful isn't helpful but being prepared is smart.

Before the termination

When preparing for a termination, be alert to possible behavioral “red flags” — purposely seeking out any information you can to unearth them should remain a priority.

Learn as much as you can about the departing employee: Read the employee file thoroughly, review the coaching notes or employee relations files and talk to the manager.

You are trying to build up a picture of how the departing employee may react. Does he have a history of aggressive or unpredictable behavior? Are there any known stressors at home, such as financial issues or relationship breakdowns, which may make the employee experience the loss of income or work identity even more acutely?

Has progressive discipline or ongoing performance issues led to a tense or strained relationship with his manager? What behavioral patterns can you piece together on the employee?

Depending on the information you uncover, form a strategy to manage any potential or identified risks. If the employee has a history of aggression or interpersonal difficulties, consider having security posted outside the meeting room while it takes place — or, in extreme cases, discuss with legal counsel the possibility of conducting the meeting over the phone with paperwork to follow via courier.

Regardless of the information gathered, the nature of the meeting requires a level of heightened alert during the termination discussion — despite your research, you don't know how an employee will react.

Plan the logistics of the meeting thoughtfully, with caution, respectfulness, and common sense. Attempt to balance discretion on behalf of the departing employee with your own safety.

Find a balance between a private location and one that's deserted. If possible, conduct the termination in a meeting room in the vicinity of the rest of your HR team or at least where there is some foot traffic. Though we typically try to conduct terminations either in the morning or late in the day, this shouldn't be taken to the extreme — there is no reason to conduct a termination so early or so late that no one else is in the building.

Don't conduct terminations on a Friday if you can avoid it...leaving no contact options for the separated employee can lead to them ruminating and "stewing" about it over the weekend.

Similarly, there is no reason to keep the planned exit entirely confidential to the point of endangering yourself or the employee's manager. Ensure a trusted member of the HR

team is aware you will be conducting a termination; along with the location and time it is planned to commence (often another member of the HR team will already be aware the termination is planned).

If possible, have them walk past the meeting room periodically to listen for signs of a deteriorating situation.

If there is on-site security, it is a sensible precaution to inform them of a planned exit shortly before it commences. Seriously consider arranging for an outplacement consultant/behavioral health consultant to be on-site during the termination and have her or him wait in the next room.

Not only will she/he be an additional person who can assist or seek assistance if things start to deteriorate, but after the meeting she/he will be able to help the employee start to work through his emotions before he has to face the world.

Something as simple as helping the employee figure out how he is going to communicate the news to his family can have a huge impact in defusing negative emotions.

In preparing for the meeting, take the cautious approach one step further — visit the meeting room in advance of the termination meeting and use the space to enhance your safety. Take advantage of the barriers furniture provides.

Plan where everyone is going to sit. Typically there are three people present during a termination: the departing employee, his manager and an HR representative. You should never find yourself in the situation of having the departing employee positioned to block your exit.

Similarly, there should never be anyone sitting directly behind the employee. This causes stress and could exacerbate the negative emotions the employee will be feeling.

Sit across the table from the employee and close to the door. Inform the manager in advance of where you recommend she or he sit during the meeting. Also, if possible, choose chairs with safety in mind. Switch them around or grab some from a neighboring room to ensure you and the manager have swivel chairs on wheels to allow you to jump up or away from the table quickly. Give the employee a stationary chair to avoid giving him the same advantage.

Remove any unnecessary items that could be used as weapons. These include the employees coat or bags, scissors, letter openers, rulers, cutlery, extra pens or pencils in the room - or at least put it out of reach or plain sight.

Meetings rooms are typically empty and have a variety of seating options, so they are ideal for termination meetings. Keep your smartphone tucked away in a pocket or portfolio and turn it to silent — you may need it but you don't want it to disrespectfully interrupt the meeting. Consider programming your cell phone to call 911 on speed dial in case you need it.

Prepare the manager in advance to communicate the crafted exit message to her/his employee simply and clearly. The manager should be prepped to avoid using this as an opportunity to vent her frustrations with the employee or assuage any guilty feelings she may have regarding the exit.

Discuss who will answer the employee's questions and how this will be done. Shutting the questions down completely can be counterproductive and more likely inflame an employee struggling to control his emotions.

Put together a communication plan to be certain the right people will know at the right time that employment has been terminated for this individual. This plan should include colleagues, security and the appropriate contacts in IT.

This plan will help avoid a situation where the employee is allowed back into secure areas of the building and should prevent him from being able to access the organization's assets electronically.

During the termination

Having taken safety precautions, you should be able to focus on the meeting and conduct it with sincere empathy, respectfulness, and precision. However, be alert and aware of the employee's body language and responses.

As the conversation progresses and the employee comes to understand the nature of the meeting she or he will typically display emotional reactions. Good listening on your part is a basic conflict-resolution skill and can keep the conversation on track:

- Pay close attention to the employee's point of view and concerns and attempt to address them with empathy.

- Show the employee with your body language that you are listening.
- Nod your head as he or she speaks.
- Make eye contact frequently but not constantly.
- Lean forward slightly in his/her direction.
- Acknowledge what she/he is saying; paraphrase and condense what she has said and repeat it back to her and provide an opportunity for her to clarify.

If the necessary information has been communicated and the employee appears to be calm, end the conversation as quickly as possible and bring in the outplacement consultant.

The employee's manager can go back to the employee's desk to collect any personal belongings he will need to get home (such as keys, a purse, shoes and a coat). The rest of his belongings can be couriered to his home or picked up later. Generally, it is not a good idea to allow the employee to return to the workplace before normal working hours or after normal working hours to pack up his belongings. Arrange this ahead of time.

Collect keys, security cards, smartphones and any other organization assets from him. Try not to have the employee going back to his desk to collect belongings — if the outplacement consultant is there, she may help reason with the employee.

If you follow this approach, take precautions by informing security (if available) of the visit and ask that another member of the HR team be present with you.

After the meeting has taken place and the employee has his necessary belongings, have the outplacement consultant escort the employee from the building and straight into a taxi home — if possible.

Obtain a taxi chit for the departing employee. Not only is this a humane gesture to avoid the employee having to stand around in public waiting for transit or having to drive in an emotional state, it ensures the employee leaves the business location sooner than later.

After the meeting

When all else has been done, ensure execution of the communication plan and document any notable aspects of the meeting, particularly if there was any conflict or aggression. Remember to stay alert when entering and leaving the building at work.

Collaborate with your agency experts on prevention of violence in the workplace, and ensure you have a strategy to assess how this particular situation unfolds over the next few weeks. Pay attention to any “anniversary dates” or arbitration dates pending.

Remember to look after yourself and find a way to release the tension and emotion you will have felt during the termination. Remember — you are an employee too and employee assistance program (EAP) counsellors are available any time if you need to talk.