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Employment

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Three areas management must handle w delicacy

John Heckers

Most of us enjoy the interaction with people that comes with a management position. Today's workplace tends to have people who are motivated, bright and engaged in their work.

But there are some interactions most of us would prefer to skip, but can't. Three problem areas for most employers are interviewing, discrimination resolution and termination. It's essential that these unpleasant realities be handled with both skill and an understanding of the legal requirements surrounding these issues. Here are a few tips.

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- Interviewing a candidate - This has a great deal in common with going on a first blind date with someone you've just met through the Internet. Imagine, if you will, that after one date, you've got to decide if you're going to get married next week and have kids together. As frightening as this sounds, it's similar to what you face when interviewing a candidate for your company.

You're about to trust a stranger with the good will and - often - financial security of your company. If you're working for a large company, the risk is spread around a bit. But if you're the CEO of a smaller company, one hiring mistake could cost you everything.

A healthy skepticism in the hiring process would serve you well. Too many employers hire by the seat of their pants. They rely on gut-level feelings to make a hiring decision, and interview with a rambling and unstructured conversation.

Not only is this sort of hiring ineffective, it might be illegal because of certain aspects of Equal Employment Opportunity Act. Rather than relying on gut-level feelings and guessing games, it's best to have a structured hiring process that includes time with the candidate as well as interviews by numerous people.

A good hiring process also will include a good reference-checking process. This often means going beyond references given by the candidate to check the "street." That means asking people you know what

they've heard about the prospective hire; Googling the candidate; checking MySpace, LinkedIn, Facebook and Spock.com; and speaking with former managers at previous companies.

A healthy dose of realism also means watching the new employee closely for several months after the hire to assure that he or she is worthy of the trust you've placed in them.

- Dealing with sexual harassment or other discrimination complaints - If you haven't had to deal with this situation yet, don't worry. You will, sooner or later, regardless of the size of your company.

Your best option is to consult your human resources or legal departments, if you have them. But the best advice is not to jump to conclusions.

Separate the alleged perpetrator of the harassment or discrimination from the alleged victim, but don't assume anything until an investigation happens.

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Don't take sides in these disputes. An accusation doesn't equal a fact, and people have been known to make false accusations. The investigation, if you're doing it, must be thorough and fair to both sides.

Make sure you're not a target of false (or real) complaints by exercising extreme caution in your behavior. Never meet behind closed doors with employees of the opposite gender unless it's in a conference room with plenty of glass or with someone else present.

Watch your speech and eliminate any sexual innuendo or any shadow of possible ethnic, racial or religious humor. Your behavior must be exemplary.

- Terminating an employee - While The Donald may enjoy saying "You're fired," the rest of us despise it. We find it difficult to cause pain for another person, especially one with whom we've worked for a time.

But a beheading can be the best thing to happen for both your company and the fired employee. It's clear to everyone that the person you're terminating isn't performing. The longer you delay doing your job, the less respect you have from other employees.

Even the target understands that they're not performing and expects to be fired. Being fired may even be a relief.

If you must terminate, make sure it's done correctly. Many companies have a policy regarding termination. Know this policy and follow it explicitly. Again, a consultation with HR and/or legal departments is ideal, if such departments exist in your company.

If possible, give warnings, both verbal and written, prior to termination. But do it quickly. The old rule of thumb says that the first time you think about firing someone is when you should do it. There is a great deal of truth to that.

These are three land mines employers face in dealing with today's workplace. Unfortunately, each of these situations will arise for all of us sooner or later. We must be prepared to deal with them in a legally compliant and competent manner.

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