

# FIRED!

BY DIANE FAULKNER, ACC, SPHR

**C**ontrary to what many would like to believe, no one gets up in the morning and decides to make a life's mission out of messing up at work, nor does anyone deliberately intend to get fired.

These can be difficult points to remember when you're banging your head against the wall after being subjected to another litany of supervisor complaints about under-performing employees with bad attitudes. One supervisor says he wants human resources to "train" employees better. Another wants the recruiting process changed so these bad apples are screened out sooner. A branch manager doesn't understand why she just can't fire people when they start acting up.

What's a poor HR person to do?

## FIRST, WORK WITH MANAGERS

When performance trends downward, the trigger typically lies in the environment created or maintained by the nearest person in charge, the immediate supervisor. Inexperienced or ill-trained supervisors can confuse the "at-will" employee contract (which allows either the employer or employee to end the employment relationship at any time and for any or no reason) with an "at-whim" one, and decide to interpret the phrase "take action up to and including termination" to mean, "if you upset me often enough, I get to fire you when I'm fed up."

What's forgotten is that employees who have made it past the probationary period must have demonstrated the ability to be valuable team players up until the time they started stomping on tender nerves. If not, they would have been gone before the first 90 days.

So how do people go from being seemingly functional to obnoxiously dysfunctional? And what can managers do to more effectively stem that downward tide in attitude and per-

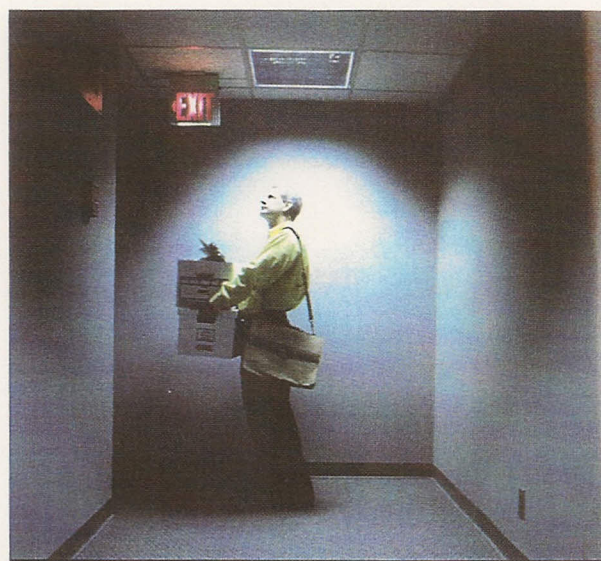
formance to avoid increasing termination rates?

When an employee's attitude heads south, not much time passes before the corresponding supervisor's opinion of that employee quickly follows. Once that happens, the HR department can pretty much be assured that a request for assistance in firing someone is not far behind. For HR, that means antennae need to be attuned to requests to rid the CU of bad attitudes.

"We like to talk about 'attitude,' which is internal," says CUES member Sheila Wojcik, Ph.D., VP/human resources for \$545 million/98,000-member, 250-employee University Federal Credit Union in Austin, Texas, "but we need to clarify what we mean by focusing on how attitude is expressed in observable behavior."

It's at that time executives, like Amy Aylward, VP/human resources for \$175 million/37,000-member, 98.5-employee Sandia Area Federal Credit Union in Albuquerque, N.M., need to put the brakes on for everyone involved. While termination may well be the ticket for a few employees, Aylward and Wojcik prefer to review both the management system and performance through counseling and education before drastic action is taken.

"One of the mistakes that supervisors can make in handling an employee who isn't 'model,'" explains Aylward, "is to get caught up in emotions and feelings. It's difficult to separate feelings from events and behaviors when someone has a bad attitude, so we work with managers to [learn to



**Gear up human resources and managers for their roles in discipline and termination.**

counsel by] explaining inappropriate events in terms of behaviors.

"We teach managers to describe what they mean by 'unproductive' or 'bad attitude.' Those terms are just too vague," Aylward continues. "Is the problem inappropriate whispering? Eye-rolling? We want them to explain the actual physical behavior that is the problem. We know it's a difficult task when you're upset at the time but, with practice, managers can and do learn to separate feelings from events and behaviors."

## SECOND, DEFINE ROLES

Not being able to clearly define problems, however, can lead to worse consequences than just higher turnover. The risk associated with a wrongful termination can land a credit union on the losing side of a lawsuit. You should actively educate managers to





keep them up to date on relevant employment laws, as well as how those laws should affect their decision-making processes in counseling.

Simply relying on staff guides or job descriptions is not enough. These old tools don't address how to grow employees, and they don't do enough to guide or protect supervisors when production slows or behaviors become unacceptable.

Even when employees are required to read, sign and return statements testifying that they understand what they've read, and they do consistently meet those written expectations, they could lose their jobs. The reason? Procedures change faster than their written descriptions, and often it's employees doing the changing and managers who have to update the guides. Behaviors on the job are modeled, so no matter what is written, read and understood, the fact is, employee behavior is more often "guided" by what is allowed in practice. Practice makes precedent which, as any good attorney will tell you, supercedes anything on paper.

### THIRD, PREPARE STAFF

Employees should be prepared, not just from orientation onward, but even before a hire is made. Every effort should be made to educate prospective employees on the credit union's philosophy and expectations. Advertising wording, waiting room reading material whether on the walls or on the end tables, as well as visual and verbal contact with current staff must work together to inform an applicant of the credit union's expectations.

Position-appropriate skills and aptitude testing for all positions should send a clear message that minimum performance standards exist and are expected to be met before face-to-face interviews with managers.

During the interview process, the recruiter should be able to explain the credit union's expectations for the position. Of course, this cannot be done if managers have not first prepared a brief on the expectations for

each position, which should be a part of the written job description.

Further, behavioral expectations must be made clear. One expectation might be that everyone is responsible for not only learning the processes of a position, but also for developing improvements based on internal and external customer needs, even if it means changing the basic make-up of any one position.

Another might be that the credit union expects all staff to clearly communicate their needs to supervisors should they discover more or different tools are necessary to be effective in their positions. And a few more might be that it is every individual's responsibility to attempt to resolve interpersonal difficulties before bringing in a manager, that a calm disposition is expected at all times and that there is never a good reason to raise voices in the workplace. Corresponding respect for opinions, knowledge, skills and abilities follows.

Once someone is hired, those involved in facilitating orientation should dedicate a portion of time to review expectations. During the initial days on the actual job, the supervisor should also review expectations, so hires begin to become ingrained through repetition.

### DISCIPLINARY ACTIONS

If the CU has prepared managers and explained expectations to employees, while making training and tools available to both, but still doesn't see an improvement, then another dimension of counseling needs to occur.

"Discipline is an adverse employment action that, done incorrectly, can have serious consequences," says Aylward. The "actions" can take a variety of forms and can result from one or many counseling sessions; the number of actions can be one or many. "It just depends on the issue, your policies and even what state you're in," says Aylward. "Some state laws are very specific in regards to terminations. You also have to consider the examples in your policy. If you don't follow what you have written, you're setting yourself up to be criticized

## Resources

Check out *Hire Right: CUES Employment Skills Kit*. It consists of four basic language and math skills test. For more, visit [www.cues.org](http://www.cues.org). Click on "Shop," then "Staffing Products."


Understanding the work-related behaviors and motivations of current and potential employees will help ensure a good job fit. CUES members can use the Predictive Index Management System to help make more effective staffing decisions. Go to [www.cues.org](http://www.cues.org) and click on "Strategic Services."

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internally, by legal action or even by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Generally, though, if you've talked to an employee before about certain behaviors (that interfere with production), the best bet during a disciplinary action is to give them a heads up that if this behavior doesn't stop, termination will follow."

At University FCU, Wojcik says they use "a four-step process that includes a verbal warning, a written warning that is signed, probation and then termination."

"The written warning is signed by the supervisor and the employee (although the employee certainly has the right to refuse to sign; in that case, the refusal should be noted on the document). We encourage supervisors to have a senior HR representative present during this counseling session as well," Wojcik explains.

"Of course," she says, "it depends on the situation, but if an employee with a good track record suddenly demonstrates consistently poor performance, this process can take a long time. It's taken up to two years before. It's also been immediate, though, but that was for fraudulent activity. The key is to have a consistent approach throughout the organization." 

Diane Faulkner, ACC, SPHR, former VP/human resources for Coastline FCU in Jacksonville, Fla., is a free-lance writer and speaker on business issues. Contact her at 904.997.0004 or by e-mail at [dkf\\_mail@bellsouth.net](mailto:dkf_mail@bellsouth.net).