

HR Professionals Week



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HR MEMOS TO MANAGERS: 5 Critical Checkpoints



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How to silence 7 common employee gripes

A recent study says that 40% of managers in the United States are considered “bad bosses” by their employees. Yet most managers assume that their relationships with their employees are running smoothly.

Obviously, some of those bosses are wrong ... and that can create major problems for a business. A Gallup poll says organizations are 50% less productive—and 44% less profitable—when serious boss-employee conflicts exist.

According to the book *30 Reasons Employees Hate Their Managers*, some common employee complaints about management, plus ways managers can silence them, include:

1. “My boss doesn’t respect me.”

- Get to know your employees as people.
- Treat them as adults and respect their privacy.
- Recognize that employees have lives outside work and try to accommodate those needs.

2. “Nobody appreciates my hard work.”

- Provide regular feedback and recognition.
- Mix an equal number of “thank-yous” and “good jobs” with your critiques. Ask employees for their ideas, and then use them.
- Thank and reward employees while they’re in the act of performing well; don’t wait for their next review.

3. “There are different rules for different people.”

- Focus on being fair and consistent with the workload, pay, perks and appreciation.
- Be aware of the legal risks of making work decisions based on race, age, gender, religion or disability status.

4. “My performance reviews are useless.”

- Provide continuous feedback. Nothing in the review should come as a surprise.
- Involve employees in setting goals, and adapt a development mind-set.
- Focus on specific employee behaviors (and cite documented examples). Don’t criticize the person’s character traits.
- Conduct reviews on time.

5. “My boss micromanages my work.”

- Realize that employees are not happy when they can't make decisions. Delegate when possible.
- Allow employees to have more say in how they do their work.

6. “We have too many meetings.”

- Institute a time limit on meetings.
- Use a meeting facilitator.

7. “I hate coming to work.”

- Ask employees what specifically would improve their outlook. Try to at least meet them halfway.
- Consider how you can enrich jobs (or juggle tasks among employees) to make them more motivated.

25 good interview questions ... and 8 to avoid

When preparing to interview job candidates, it's important for supervisors to plan out their lines of questioning. Decide which skills are most important for that position, then focus your questions on assessing those skills. Here are some sample questions to work from:

Employment history

1. If you had to evaluate your performance in your present job on a scale of 1 to 10, how would you grade yourself and why?
2. What skills have you acquired in your present job that make you the right candidate for this job?
3. Describe a recent event in your job that really challenged your capabilities.
4. Why do you want to leave your present job?
5. What have you heard about our company that leads you to believe you would like to work here?

Communications

1. Are you more comfortable working on a team or on your own?
2. What types of people do you find difficult to work with?
3. How often do you like to meet with your supervisor?
4. If you had an idea for a new project, how would you communicate it to your co-workers and supervisors and get it approved?
5. Describe what you consider to be the perfect boss.

Organization

1. How do you go about planning your schedule for the day?
2. How do you relieve stress on the job?
3. What tasks in your present job do you consider to be a waste of time?
4. Do you consider yourself efficient? Why?

5. If you were given a long-term project, how would you approach the work?

Motivation

1. Tell me about a situation where you really blew it. How did you handle it? What did you learn?
2. What motivates you to do your best?
3. Think of a major accomplishment you had in your present job. What aspect did you find most satisfying?
4. If you could buy any skill that you don't possess, what would it be?
5. What tactics should a supervisor use to get the best out of you?

Managerial

1. What qualities do you possess that would make you a good manager?
2. Tell me about the best manager you ever had and what you learned from that person.
3. Tell me about the worst manager you ever had and what you learned from that person.
4. How do you create an environment that fosters teamwork?
5. How would you handle a conflict between your employees?

8 questions to NEVER ask

1. Are you married? Divorced?
2. How old are you?
3. Do you have (or plan to have) children?
4. Do you own or rent your home?
5. What church do you attend?
6. Do you have any debts?
7. Do you belong to any social or political groups?
8. Do you suffer from an illness or disability?

Avoid the perception of bullying: 8 do's and don'ts

Increased sensitivity to bullying in America may have started in the classroom, but it has quickly moved to the workplace.

The growth of anti-bullying laws, policies and public campaigns are making employees ultra-aware to potential bullying situations at work.

For supervisors, that means it's more important than ever to be alert to how your words and actions are being delivered ... and received. Managers should know how to be authoritative and provide constructive criticism without giving employees an excuse to claim bullying.

Federal discrimination laws don't specifically prohibit bullying. According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), "The laws enforced by EEOC do not prohibit simple teasing, offhand comments or isolated incidents that are not very serious."

Nevertheless, employees who feel they are victims of bullying due to their race, sex, religion or age are able to file discrimination lawsuits under the federal Civil Rights Act.

Plus, employees have a legitimate legal claim if they can prove poor treatment by a manager was the result of retaliation for some earlier "protected" activity (taking leave, filing a complaint, etc.). Or they can bring bullying claims under the banner of "intentional infliction of emotional distress."

In addition, legislation has been introduced in more than half of the states to make bullying at work illegal.



Don't become a target

More than a third (37%) of U.S. workers report they've been bullied at work and, they say, the majority (72%) of bullies are bosses, says a survey by Zogby International.

Studies show bullying can affect the victim's physical and emotional health. Employers, in turn, may suffer the cost of lost productivity, decreased attendance and increased medical claims and legal risks.

Advice: When managers treat employees professionally and with courtesy, bullying will never become an issue. Here are eight do's and don'ts:

- 1. Do know the definition of bullying:** A form of abuse that includes verbal humiliation, persistent and unwarranted criticism, and intentional social isolation and exclusion.
- 2. Do stay focused on job performance.** Avoid negative comments that are unrelated to the task at hand, such as remarks about the employee's personal life, appearance or actions. *Example:* Comments like "any dummy could do this job" could be construed as bullying.
- 3. Don't single out an employee for discipline,** such as taking away work responsibilities without a reason or explanation or setting tougher deadlines that make success more difficult.
- 4. Don't respond to employee mistakes with an accusing tone and loud voice.** Instead, describe the problem and suggest ways to prevent it. A manager's job is to teach, not scold.
- 5. Do be cautious of "jokes."** Don't persistently tease employees or make them the target of your jokes. They likely won't see the humor.
- 6. Do keep reprimands private.** There's no need to publicly berate or disparage the worker in front of co-workers.
- 7. Don't trade in gossip and rumors.** As a manager, you must keep above the fray and not gossip or spread rumors.
- 8. Finally, don't be hypersensitive.** It's your job to offer constructive criticism when employees' performance or behavior strays. That's not bullying. Be alert to behavior that crosses the line, but don't be afraid to do your job.

When you are the target: How to calm angry workers

Sometimes, managers are on the receiving end of aggressive behavior from angry employees. Use the following "Six A's" to deflect employee anger:

- 1. Abstain from interrupting.** Let the other person have his or her say. Eventually, the employee has to take a breath, which helps you move to the second step.
- 2. Agree to the extent that you can.** You don't have to agree on who's right and who's wrong, but you can agree that a problem exists or at least that the person is upset. *Example:* "You sound angry about what's happened."

3. Acknowledge the problem. Even if you think the person is overreacting, it's important to validate his or her perception. Show your empathy by saying, "I can understand why you're upset."

4. Apologize to the extent that you can. Know the difference between accepting responsibility and offering a sincere but blame-free apology. *Example:* "I'm sorry that happened to you."

5. Act within your authority. If you can solve the problem, promise that you will ... and follow through. In other situations, you may not have the authority. But you can offer your understanding and forward the complaint (or direct the employee) to the appropriate person.

6. Assess the outcome. Take time later to reflect on the confrontation. What did you say or do that helped the situation or made matters worse? Reflecting on your words and outcomes will help you be more effective next time.

Worried about a new hire? 7 ‘salvage operation’ tips

Most managers have faced this dilemma at least once in their careers: A candidate looks great on paper and gives a knockout interview; but two weeks into the new job, you’re less than enthused.

The new employee doesn’t show that same initiative or smarts that you thought you saw in the interview. You now have a choice: Cut your losses or run a salvage operation.

If you ultimately decide that the employee definitely isn’t right for the job, do both of you a favor and cut the ties soon (after discussing the matter with HR).

But maybe the employee shows promise and you’re not ready to give up just yet. If that’s the case, here are some tips and points to consider in running this salvage operation:

- 1. Rethink your expectations.** Is the employee really wrong for the job? Maybe your expectations were too high. If the person wowed you in the interview, maybe you expected instant miracles. If so, re-examine your thinking.
- 2. Is it a matter of style?** People often confuse style and substance. Perhaps it’s the way the employee operates, rather than what he or she delivers, that’s giving you heartburn. If so, having a heart-to-heart talk about your corporate culture and what you deem acceptable may resolve the problem.
- 3. Ratchet up the training.** When new hires don’t fit, they may not understand enough about how the organization operates or what they’re expected to do. Their failure may be one of asking too few questions, not an inability to do the job. Consider an investment in additional training.
- 4. Create a buddy system.** Having a sounding board or mentor is a critical help in navigating a new job. Consider pairing the new hire up with someone whose counsel he can seek.
- 5. Ensure clear expectations.** Does the employee really know what you expect? You may have run through the job description on day one, but that may have been a blur to the employee. Sit down and clarify in more detail what’s expected in terms of quality and quantity of work, plus behavior.
- 6. Manage more closely.** New employees in trouble can’t be given the same degree of autonomy and trust as high achievers who meet every expectation. For the salvage operation to work, frequent meetings detailing projects, deadlines and checkpoints will be crucial.
- 7. Consider an internal transfer.** If you believe the employee can still be productive yet you are unhappy with the match, explore whether there’s another place in the organization where the person’s style and skills will be a better fit.

Final tips: When new hires go off-track so quickly, review the recruiting/hiring/training process with HR to see where it went wrong. Unless you can identify where the disconnect occurred—elevated expectations, vague interview questions, eagerness to be done with the hiring process, etc.—it'll be easy to make the same mistake in the future.

Also, consider whether anyone made promises of long-term employment during the interview process that could come back to haunt the organization. Does the employee have a contract (even an implied one) or bring along any key contacts from his past job that you can't afford to lose? These are topics to discuss with HR before cutting the worker loose.

10 ways an attorney will attack you on the stand

If you're ever hauled into court to testify in a case against our organization, what you say, and how you say it, can sink our defense or make our arguments float. And don't forget: More than your credibility as a manager may be on trial; you could be held personally liable for your actions, if the plaintiff is angry enough with you.

The good news: Some basic training and monitoring can prepare you to ward off the slings and arrows of an enemy attorney. Here are 10 weak spots that opposing attorneys will exploit to discredit you. Use them as a checklist for preventing a credibility attack.

1. Being unfamiliar with our policies and procedures. A jury will view your lack of knowledge as uncaring and lax, at best: purposeful and negligent, at worst. After all, how can you enforce policies that you don't even know yourself?

2. Sloppy documentation. Most discrimination cases aren't won with "smoking gun" evidence. They're proven circumstantially, often through documents or statements made before the lawsuit is filed. You're smart enough not to admit bias directly, but juries know that a lot of testimony is self-serving. That's why documents, particularly email, can help the employee show discriminatory intent.

3. Dishonest appraisals. Performance reviews are one of our most important forms of documentation, yet managers often inflate the ratings. When you later try to blame poor performance for an adverse employment action, those dishonest appraisals open up a land mine of credibility concerns.

4. Inconsistent statements. When responding to charges filed with the EEOC or state agencies, you often have to submit position statements or execute affidavits. You can bet the employee's attorney will review those statements, particularly affidavits, and introduce them at trial, especially if your story has changed. Keep it consistent.

5. Not taking complaints seriously. Turning a blind eye to any complaints of unfairness or perceived illegal actions will kill our credibility and yours. Comments like "I'm not a babysitter" or "Boys will be boys" will jeopardize everything.

6. Poor interviewing techniques. It may be easy to answer the question, "Why did you hire the person you did?" But managers often run into trouble when they have to answer, "Why did you reject certain other candidates?" That's because rejection decisions typically aren't well documented, and you may not recall the reasons later on. This "selective amnesia" will come off as a cover-up for discrimination.

7. Changing rationales over time. Whenever a plaintiff can show that our reasons for making an adverse employment decision change midstream, our credibility is shot. Smart attorneys will argue, successfully, that our “reasons” are just pretext for discrimination.

8. Lack of knowledge as a well-rounded leader. Would you trust a brain surgeon who didn’t stay updated on recent developments in the field? Well, juries will expect, and the plaintiff’s lawyer will encourage them to expect, that you’re staying abreast of developments in employment law.

9. Overdocumenting. You hear the mantra, “document, document, document.” But you can overdocument, especially when it all occurs right before a firing.

10. Failing to work with an employee before firing. Remember, termination is the “capital punishment” of the employment world. Juries are likely to sympathize with employees who have lost their livelihood and self-esteem. A manager who fires without first trying to improve performance will appear insensitive and mean-spirited. Conversely, the manager who really tries to improve things before taking drastic action will stand a much better chance of winning in court.