



# TEAM TACTICS

## CONGRATULATIONS, YOU'RE FIRED!

By Dr. Andy Edelman

Whether letting someone go for poor performance or downsizing an entire crew because of declining company profits, the stress of firing can be enormous for all concerned. In fact, failing to plan and execute a sound procedure for firing can result in needless stress and anxiety, as well as potentially costly litigation or retaliation. Although never a pleasant process, proactive coatings contractors must master the art of termination in order to maintain operational performance, ethical standards and, at the same time, prevent any potential incidents of workplace violence.

### 1. HIRE TOUGH, MANAGE EASY.

The following steps 2 through 10 would probably not be necessary if recruitment, selection, training, and retention efforts helped to match the best people with your organizational values and mission. It is far more advisable to spend the time, money, and energy hiring the right people than it is to deal with the challenges of managing and ultimately firing the wrong ones. A thorough interviewing and hiring process can help ensure that you bring only the "best and the brightest who are willing and able" on board.

### 2. SPREAD THE WORD.

Let each new hire know your expectations, the standard operating procedures of your coatings contracting business, and consequences for any breach of conduct or performance. It is far more difficult for a terminated employee to escalate to violence if the end-game outcomes are shared from the very first day of orientation training.

### 3. PLAN WITH PRECISION.

Coatings contractors and their management staff should put a systematic plan in place for the inevitable firing process, which should be headed by those with the best people skills. Every step in this process must be planned for and should include "What if..." worst-case contingency plans.

For example, it is ill-advised to terminate an employee on a Friday afternoon or right before a holiday. Develop a keen understanding of the dynamics of dealing with an individual whose source of livelihood and personal and professional self-esteem have just been jeopardized. Reactions by terminated employees can range from calm, resigned acceptance and compliance to more volatile defense mechanisms such as total denial, emotional outbursts, and in some instances physical violence. Contractors who plan for each potential scenario are far more likely to achieve a peaceful exit interview.

### 4. SET THE STAGE.

Termination proceedings should be held in a location free from prying eyes or a potential audience. The room should be neutral, without distractions (and company banners and logos which could inflame already sensitive emotions) and should be free of any objects that could be damaged or used as weapons. In addition, during the exit interview at least several persons should be present including a designated security represen-



tative to ensure accurate documentation while maintaining a safe environment in cases of verbal or physical escalation.

### 5. CUT TO THE CHASE.

Since firing an employee for any reason is never a pleasant task, it may seem appropriate to take a while to get to the point or dodge the issue in an attempt to be "nice." However, it is best to be clear, concise, and upfront about the purpose of the meeting and to summarize the reason(s) for the termination and the opportunities for development and improvement offered which were not met. In addition, the seemingly good intention of being nice will only cause the terminated employee to resent you more. The longer the exit interview lasts, the greater the likelihood of further dysfunctional communication and potential for violence.

### 6. SHOW THEM THEIR MONEY.

Offer all past-due salary or monies immediately to the employee without delay or fanfare. If there are appropriate severance pay offers, make them at this time. This will at least take some of the sting out of the termination experience.



## 7. OFFER WIN-WIN ALTERNATIVES.

In downsizing scenarios where you are forced to terminate high-quality employees, make every attempt to help them locate additional employment opportunities in the coatings industry. Also, be willing to write letters of reference when appropriate. Organizations that make attempts to take care of their valuable assets in good times and in bad will reap both short and long-term benefits. You never know if or when the person you terminate today might be your supervisor tomorrow.

## 8. ALLOW A GRACEFUL EXIT.

Unless a safety risk is present, allow terminated employees to say their goodbyes and gather their personal effects without a show of force. Yet at the same time, maintain common sense security precautions to prevent unauthorized tampering or theft of property. Be especially careful with sensitive computer data and back up all

essential files in the event that the terminated employee decides to include sabotage as a going away present.

## 9. STAY ALERT.

Security and all key management personnel must be vigilant for any "return customers." Change is difficult for all personnel and termination is a significant event in anyone's life. Although adhering to termination best practices will significantly reduce the probability of a re-escalation incident, there is always the remote chance for the terminated employee to return unexpectedly to "settle the score." You should exercise this healthy degree of caution no matter how calm the person appeared during the exit interview.

## 10. DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT.

Keep timely and accurate records at each level of the employment process

including all cases of employee counsel, warning, suspension, or termination. In nearly all cases of mediation, arbitration or litigation, the party with the best documentation will usually prevail.

Although firing an employee is never pleasant, using these simple termination strategies will help to avoid potential workplace violence incidents or costly lawsuits and, in turn, ensure that both parties can move forward in their personal and professional lives. CP

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