



Document, Document, Document: Three Keys to Effective Personnel Management

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Your supervisor reports that an employee isn't working out and should be discharged from employment. Upon further questioning, you learn the person is frequently late to work, leaves early, and has poor customer relations. Unfortunately, when you check his personnel file, you see only positive evaluations, no write-ups, and no records reflecting the schedule he has been maintaining. Do you terminate based on the words of your supervisor, or continue to employ him?

If you have ever faced this situation, you are not alone. Many companies have trouble ensuring their supervisors are maintaining accurate documentation. The importance of documentation, however, cannot be overstated. It helps set expectations and, the reality is, circumstances often do change. Today's star employee (who you may have let slide for poor performance because you like him or her) may become tomorrow's problem employee. If, however, you have allowed behavior to go uncorrected and undocumented, you risk having your decision challenged (and having to explain your actions to the EEOC or a jury). To

minimize that possibility, here are some helpful tips:

Documentation can be as simple as an e-mail

By documentation, I mean simply a record. A short e-mail to someone who comes in late may be sufficient (i.e., "Bill – I saw that you came in late today. Please be sure to get to the office by 9:00 a.m. If you are going to be late, call me."). Even a short memo to the file may be adequate. (i.e., Memo to File: Bill arrived at work this morning at 10:30.)

Maintain consistency in documentation

If you vigilantly document absences for a male employee (or a minority employee, or one with a disability, for example), but not for a female employee (or a non-minority employee, or someone without a disability), it may be perceived as discrimination. Ensure consistency or be sure there is a valid reason for the different treatment.

Just the facts

Effective documentation is generally

brief, recites only facts, and limits opinion to an absolute minimum. If someone is frequently late, it is immaterial if you think it is because he or she likes to stay out late partying.

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Provide periodic feedback

When it comes to performance evaluations, or feedback about one's performance, be honest. Ideally, an employee should not be surprised by anything in a review. While it is more convenient to judge someone's performance as acceptable rather than to be critical, it is far better to be truthful.

Act promptly

Avoid delaying documentation. The longer you wait, the more it may

appear to a jury that you are simply "papering a file."

A few final thoughts about documentation:

Think about how what you write would be interpreted by a third party (i.e., a juror). If you are angry about an employee's performance, calm down before documenting the matter.

Think about small things like typos, spelling, etc. Jurors are never impressed with those types of errors.

Think about consistency, objectivity, and fairness.

Consider whether the conduct is so problematic that immediate action must be taken regardless of the lack of documentation. Consider placing the employee on an immediate (and documented) performance plan and set firm milestones that must be attained by certain dates. You will be in better shape to take disciplinary action if performance remains a problem.

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