

Employees Behaving Badly: 6 Ways HR Can Tackle Issues

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Employees are behaving badly more often than you realize.

Many are getting away with it, research shows. But some are getting fired for it.

More than 40% of employees have experienced or witnessed inappropriate, unethical or illegal behaviors in the past two years, according to research from HR Acuity. Specifically, most of it has been:

- bullying (33%)
- corruption (28%)
- discrimination (27%), and
- microaggressions (27%)

Here's the scary part: Many of the incidents went under the radar. About 25% of employees who experience or witness bad behavior don't report it. But why?

"Employees may not trust that their organization will handle an issue appropriately. This could be due to inconsistent processes that don't instill confidence or ensure confidentiality," says Rebecca Trotsky, Chief People Officer, HR Acuity. "Or they may not think it will be taken seriously. Lastly, employees could fear retaliation or reputation damage."

That's concerning because unresolved issues cause worse damage. They fester, escalate and expose companies to brand risk and cause employees to leave.

The Spectrum of Employees Behaving Badly

While some people ignore bad behavior – and they admitted to turning their backs on some big issues — some employers are taking a 180-degree different approach: They're firing employees for what might seem like small infractions.

For instance, Meta cracked down recently, firing employees who spent \$25 meal allowances on other items. At Ernst & Young, some employees were let go for watching multiple training videos at the same time. And Target canned employees who bought hard-to-get Stanley water bottles ahead of the general public.

"It's good in the sense that it shows that companies value rules and ethics in the workplace and will act accordingly," says Trotsky. "It's good that employees will understand clearly where the lines are so they don't cross them. The trick is for organizations to hold everyone to the same standards at all levels."

Why the push on small infractions like these or running a fantasy sports league on company time? No one gives specific reasons behind the firings — after all, the actions could be termination-worthy in their company handbooks. But some speculations include: trying to reduce payroll without layoffs; right-sizing after a pandemic glut of hires; increasing efficiency; pushing unwanted employees out; or setting a new precedent.

Regardless of the reasons behind firings, HR pros in most cases want to stay ahead of rule violations and behavior infractions. And, if or when those occur, you still want to proactively handle the fallout.

Here are six key factors in managing employees behaving badly.

1. Lean into Trust

Trust is a huge component in employee engagement, job satisfaction and company performance.

You see the connection? When employers train and trust employees to do their jobs well, employees will do that. When employees trust their bosses and company have their best interests at heart — related to career and life — they will work hard, perform as expected or better and won't violate any trust.

"If an organization is spending time and resources on even very small infractions like using the photocopier for a few personal copies, it feels very out of balance for the bigger fish they likely have to fry," says Trotsky.

Trust is best exhibited, so it's reciprocated. More on that next ...

2. Build from the Top

Trust starts and ends at the top.

"If leaders at the company don't behave ethically or by the book, or even in line with the company values ... then the organization opens itself up to employees perceiving one set of rules for 'regular employees' and another for top leaders," says Trotsky.

HR leaders and the C-Suite want to work together to establish what trust looks like in your organization. For instance, walk employees through your anti-harassment, anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies. Then give them real-work examples of harassment, bullying and discrimination. Help them recognize what's wrong and its impact on trust.

Most importantly, "ensure that misconduct is investigated and handled consistently, every time, no matter who is engaged in it," says Trotsky.

3. Determine What's Important

Not all infractions are created equal. Anything along the lines of harassment, bullying and discrimination are serious and must be addressed immediately and with clarity.

But you also want to help employees understand what's below the unethical or immoral threshold.

"Providing frequent trainings for team members and specific examples of unethical or bad behavior is important," says Trotsky. "For instance, do organizations really want employees to rat each other out if they use an office supply for a personal reason? What kind of a culture does that create, and will that help the company achieve its business objectives? How much energy do they want to spend weeding through these complaints versus encouraging the truly egregious ones to be reported?"

4. Make It Easy to Report Misconduct

When employees understand what your company considers misconduct, they need to know it's easy to report without fear of repercussions.

Use your company communication tools, physical signs and training to remind employees how to report concerns and incidents.

Then give them several channels — an anonymous email, quiet space, portal, etc. — to report concerns.

5. Remove a Fear of Retaliation

Some employees who've declined to report experiences or witnessing colleagues behaving badly say the reason is they fear retaliation — perhaps from the actor or the company.

"To address this concern, it's important anti-retaliation policies are included in an organization's code of conduct as are anonymous reporting hotlines," says Trotsky.

This is critical for HR to employ and remind employees of. Regardless of the infraction's severity, employees must know they will not be punished for reporting it.

6. Emphasize the Dark Side of Silence

Make sure employees understand that there is a downside beyond the actual infraction if they don't report it.

"Only 14% of employees were able to successfully self-resolve misconduct incidents," says Trotsky. "Unreported issues can result in a few different outcomes. They'll either remain unaddressed — creating a toxic work environment and the possibility of repeated offenses — escalate — employees engaged in misconduct may feel emboldened since they weren't reprimanded—expose organizations to brand risk or cause employees to leave altogether."