



Safe Employee Terminations

Unfortunately, we live in dangerous times when terms like “Active Shooter” are part of our collective vocabulary at work. We see it happening all around us and may feel largely unequipped to respond effectively. To optimize your safety, use this Action Guide on every termination.

TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

One of the first things we want you to know is that the “feeling” you get that something is amiss really matters. Whether you call it instinct, intuition, or the voice of God; when you believe something is wrong... something probably **is** wrong. That feeling alone, even when you can’t articulate why you have it, should cause you to take extra steps to protect yourself and others.

We often hear how “We were afraid he was going to do something if he got fired,” after an incident. Don’t let that happen to you: Trust your instincts!

WATCH FOR WARNING SIGNS

Secondly, let’s talk about what to watch for. There are a few dozen considerations a threat assessment professional uses to evaluate the risk of a violent outcome, but for the sake of offering you something usable, here are thirteen contributing factors to watch for in an employee you’re about to terminate:

CONCERNS

The Presence Scale

When considering each factor, don’t think of them as simply “Yes” or “No” answers.

Think about where each might fall on a 10 scale, with 0 being “No Indication” that this element is present and 10 being “Highly and Regularly” present.

- Do they fail to take responsibility?
- Do they tend to blame others?
- Are they not very adaptable?
- Do they have low self-esteem?
- Are they a loner with other coworkers?
- Do they suffer from depression?
- History of mental or emotional health issues?
- Experienced multiple major life stressors?
- Have they had irrational beliefs and ideas?
- How about a sudden change in belief system?
- Do they have little empathy for others?
- Have they had severe mood swings?
- Have they recently purchased a firearm?

The existence of one or two of these factors, especially when rated above 5 on the “Presence Scale”, should cause you to dig deeper and monitor closely. But if you note four or more, we strongly recommend you call a threat management professional for an in-depth assessment and expert guidance.

PREP FOR THE INTERVIEW

The most important factor? Controlling your own emotions. You may well be dreading the event which means that you’re likely to be anxious, fearful, or even angry. These are normal responses to such a situation, so it is best to accept them and work to manage them through preparation and breathing.

STAY CALM

If you start to feel your heart rate rise, it’s important to get a handle on it before it impacts cognitive processing. When angry, we’ve all said things we came to regret, and this is not the time for that.

Therefore, to lower your heart rate, follow these steps:

1. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose (to a 4 count).
2. Pause.
3. Exhale slowly and deeply through your lips.
4. Repeat twice.

We’d like to offer detailed suggestions on specific verbiage to use during the termination discussion, but those choices vary widely based on several factors including the subject’s behavioral style, hidden motivators, history with supervisors, past disciplinaries, known triggers, etc. What we will say is this: **Strive to be kind, caring, and firm.** Set out the bullet points of the conversation ahead of time and talk through the subject’s potential responses with a colleague, making plans for how to deal with each one.

You want to avoid rambling. Lay out the facts early on. But be kind. Then get to the point and explain that a separation is required. Show that you care by listening to their concerns, always seeking to point them toward a better future.

HAVE THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN THE ROOM

Generally, we believe the manager’s manager and an HR representative should be present during a termination. No other people are recommended.

In other words, we want the subject’s bosses’ boss in the room as opposed to his direct supervisor. This practice provides one level of separation from the person most often targeted and an opportunity for the subject to feel like someone with power over his boss is hearing any message he wants to relay.

Often, we get a request to have security or law enforcement representation in the room. **We strongly recommend against this practice.** It is rarely beneficial to let the subject know he is intimidating us, as that’s often his goal. When he sees a uniformed police officer or security guard or Big Bob from the loading dock, he knows one thing for certain – you are afraid. That may only serve to encourage him to escalate his efforts because he knows they are working.

Instead, place your protectors in an adjacent room. Arrange for them to discreetly monitor the proceedings. Simply letting them listen in on a phone can provide the intel they need to know if intervention is required.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT TIMING

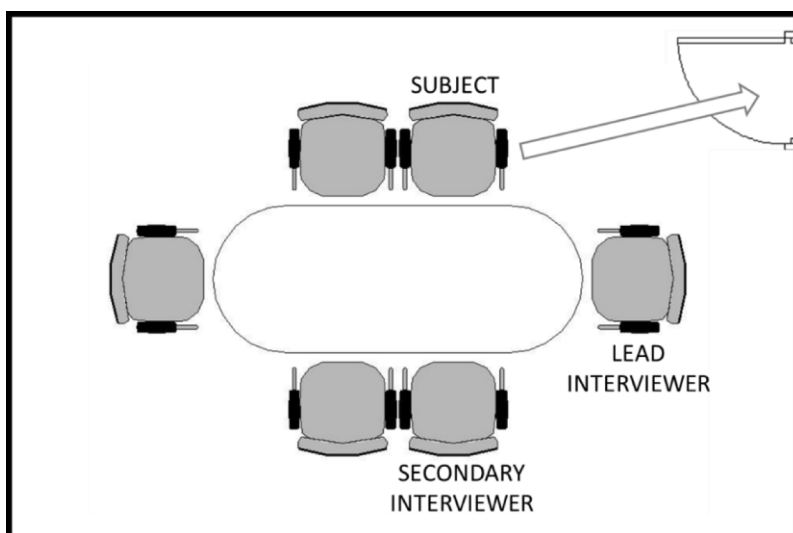
If the subject is dangerous, getting him out of the building sooner is better. Make a plan that includes shutting down building and network access. Ideally this would happen *during* his final interview.

As to what day of the week, for someone who works a standard Monday-Friday schedule, we generally recommend conducting the termination late Friday afternoon. The brief explanation for this choice is that, when the former employee wakes up Saturday morning, we want him to focus on the things he normally does on a Saturday morning off. Mow the lawn. Hang out with the kids. Walk the dog. All things he can normally do.

As opposed to waking up on Wednesday morning and focusing on the one thing he would normally do that he can't do – go to work. No friends to hang out with. The kids are in school. Nothing to do but watch YouTube videos about workplace shootings.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT LOCATION

In most circumstances, the best place to conduct the termination is a conference room near the exit. In this way the employee can leave the meeting and walk directly outside to their car *without* walking past a line of people staring at them. It may make sense to have their personal items packed and ready to go in a nearby room.



There are also a couple of things to remember when setting up the room itself. If possible, a conference room with more than one entrance is ideal. As in the illustration, if the subject gets angry and decides to leave, he can exit without walking too closely to anyone else. An enraged employee standing six inches behind you can do a lot of damage even without a gun. And you would likely never see it coming.

DON'T MAKE MATTERS WORSE

There are basically four possible responses when confronted with such a threat during the interview, three of which are wrong:

1. Ignore it.
2. Show fear - "Oh my gosh did you just threaten me?! Yikes!"
3. Get angry - "Oh yeah buster? Bring it on and let's see what happens!"
4. The right response as outlined on this page.

The lead interviewer is also in a good position to exit quickly. Without two doors to the room, though, the secondary interviewer is in the least desirable position. That's why two points of exit are best.

RESPONDING PROPERLY TO THREATS

It's important for your former employee to feel heard. So, give him chances, even encouragement, to speak. Unless he takes off on a lengthy rant that appears to be escalating, don't interrupt. Let him finish.

Keeping your heart rate and emotions under control will help prepare you for a veiled threat like "You're going to wish you'd never done this" or a direct threat like "I'm going to come back here and kill you"

Downplay and redirect to the future. That's the key. Even if you're scared half to death, say things like "I know you didn't mean that. We all say things we don't mean when we're angry. That's not the John Smith I know."

Next, point them back to the future with "You're going to get past this. It won't be long until you find a spot to fit in. You've been through hard stuff before and you will get through this too" and similar reassurances.

No matter what they say, just keep downplaying and redirecting. Once the interview is over you may need to call 9-1-1, but *during* your conversation, never let them see you sweat.

GET THE PERSON SAFELY OFF THE PROPERTY

This is an area where a fine line exists between safety and dignity. The best course of action varies greatly with each individual circumstance. In our work with clients, we've let people walk back to their desk alone, gather their belongings, and let themselves out. On the other hand, in different circumstances, we've monitored a former employee's egress with two trained protection professionals only steps away.

Strive to maintain a departing employee's dignity by not embarrassing them with the "Walk of Shame" in front of their peers. Unless it's absolutely necessary, that sort of thing can push a difficult situation toward becoming a dangerous one. There are other, better, ways to keep your people safe without knocking over the last domino this employee may have standing.

MONITOR AND REASSESS - EVEN AFTER THEY'RE GONE!

Just because the employee has driven away does not necessarily mean we're all safe now. We know from simply watching the news that sometimes, separated workers come back years later and wreak havoc. What you may not know is that there are always warning signs of such an attack. ALWAYS! We must get in a position to watch for them and correctly interpret their meaning.

Pay attention to what they're doing every step of the way. Did they file for unemployment? Did another worker say they saw them purchasing a new gun last week? Listen for both the facts and the rumors. We can separate the intelligence from the information later. For now, it all matters.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE

We promise that if you put these considerations into practice, you and your people will be safer. Of course, this article barely scratches the surface of what you need to know.

For expert guidance, call us. **The initial assessment of your situation is always free.**

No one *ever* regrets asking for help to prevent violence. Not asking always leads to hard questions no one wants to answer. Be the kind of leader that has no regrets. Call for help when you need it.

Get to Know Us

We are **Threat Assessment and Management** professionals with credentials that run the gamut from police chief to clinical psychologist, from military to global corporate security. We've been teaching workplace violence prevention and active shooter mitigation since the mid-90's and have helped thousands of HR professionals and other leaders stay safe.

We've helped clients like Lululemon, Domtar, Pepsi, Gates, and Walmart.

We always seek to inform and empower, partnering to keep you safe.