

## Tackling Inappropriate Behaviors In The Workplace

One of the downsides to every company's greatest resources – their human capital – is inappropriate employee behavior that can often occur. How can employers minimize inappropriate behavior in the workplace and diminish liability? We live in a time where some behaviors are main stream. We casually refer to gossip as “water cooler talk” or laugh at off-color jokes without a second thought. This behavior can destroy employee morale and poison the work environment. Employers should strive to provide an atmosphere in which all employees can perform without the threat of harassment, physical or emotional harm.

How? Consider each of these four easy steps when addressing issues of inappropriate behavior in the workplace:

### **Step 1: Identify Inappropriate Behavior**

Inappropriate behavior should not be subjective or questionable. Clearly identify any behaviors that you feel are inappropriate for your office and give clear guidelines in your employee handbook on consequences for the behavior, up to and including termination.

Common inappropriate behaviors include, but are not limited to:

1. Inappropriate Dress – This includes anything outside of the dress code stated in your employee handbook. You should be very specific when discussing expectations for dress including skirt lengths, types of shoes and even types of clothes allowed or prohibited during “casual dress” days.
2. Workplace Aggression – The repeated mistreatment of one or more employees with a malicious mix of humiliation, intimidation and sabotage of performance. Often times a bully will use rumors, innuendo and public discrediting to create a hostile work environment and may gather others to participate. According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, 37% of American workers have been bullied at work.
3. Disruptive Behavior – This broad category can include yelling, tantrums, bullying, displaying the need for excessive control, disregard of duty and insubordination.
4. Gossip – Rumors of an intimate nature that have no bearing or relevance to company goals.

### **Step 2: Educate Your Staff**

Give all managers appropriate learning tools to identify what is inappropriate in the workplace and establish company policy for handling such behavior. Be clear on what behaviors are illegal

in addition to inappropriate. Be very specific on whom to approach and what to document when these situations arise.

Make sure employees know what behaviors are and are not acceptable in the workplace. Many times, situations can be avoided by announcing expectations right away. Additionally, employees should be able to comfortably approach their manager about inappropriate behaviors observed without punishment. Consider instructing employees how to report inappropriate behavior in upper management.

### **Step 3: Lead By Example**

Executives and management should set the tone for acceptable behavior in the workplace. It's hard to enforce policies if leadership is not adhering to them. Make sure you "walk the talk".

### **Step 4: Consistently Enforce Your Policies**

Be consistent in when and how you enforce your policies. Behaviors are a tricky subject and become even more difficult to punish when one person gets away with displaying them but another does not. Disciplining inconsistently can lead to discrimination claims. Consult your human resource representative to ensure your employee handbook establishes step-by-step disciplinary procedures.

When in doubt about handling any of these steps, consult your human resource representative or employment law specialist. It is very important to manage inappropriate behavior in the workplace to avoid legal disputes and low employee morale. An optimal workplace will prove far more productive.

*For more information on handling inappropriate behaviors in the workplace, contact Tandem HR at 630.928.0510 or visit [www.tandemhr.com](http://www.tandemhr.com). The staff at Tandem HR contributed to this article. It is intended as information only and is not a substitute for legal advice. Tandem HR is a professional employer organization specializing in strategic HR partnership with small and mid-sized businesses.*

*Copyright © 2009 Tandem HR. All rights reserved.*