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Terminating with dignity

By Paperitalo Staff

The call was like many I have received over the years. An acquaintance had been terminated. Didn't see it coming. The Human Resource Department had gone through contortions to structure this in such a way to keep the company from being sued.

With the annual termination season, December, less than 90 days away, it is time to talk about this.

First, I have told you before what Peter Schutz, President and CEO of Porsche from 1981 to 1986, said about employment: "You are hired for your résumé and fired for your personality." Gosh, I wish I had said that, it is so true. This is true even in downsizings, for the ones axed, if there are several in a department scheduled to shrink, are the ones with which management cannot get along.

So with this opening, most of the rest of this column is directed at you acting as employers until near the end, where there is some good advice for all employees to remember.

OK, so you are mad at old Suzy, for real or made up reasons. You don't care if she has been a faithful employee for twenty years, she has got to go. Being the big wheel at your location, you call HR, summon them to your office, and you plot together to figure what you can do to dump her at the minimum cost and in a way that is the least likely for your company or you personally to be sued. It is a problem—she is over forty, female and has some health issues. On top of that, she is well liked and her personnel file is impeccable.

Side note—then why is she being canned? See the Peter Schutz quote above—it happens every day.

So you plot and plan with HR. They are pushing for a month's severance for each year of service plus COBRA for two years plus all accrued vacation and time off. Because you are mad at Suzy, you push back. Somewhere in between you two reach an agreement. Paperwork is prepared and the plan to ambush Suzy with the "sign this now or who knows what you'll get" conversation at a time she least suspects. Say, when she is returning from being off sick next Monday. Hit her first thing in the morning, she won't see it coming.

This is the stupidest, most expensive thing you can do. It is as stupid as President Jefferson Davis firing General Joseph E. Johnston during the campaign for the capture of Atlanta in 1864. Why? The troops were demoralized. They thought the sacking was unjustified. It affected their ability to fight General Sherman.

If Suzy is admired down in the ranks, you have royally messed up, just like Davis did. Some really good people you wanted to keep, seeing how you treated Suzy, could decide it is time to leave themselves. Your thinking you were so smart could affect productivity of a large portion of your regime for some time to come. Suzy is surely going to go out in the world and, at a minimum, not provide a glowing reference for your company or you personally. You may not be able to attract some of the talent you would like to attract or at least be forced to go further to find it.

Treat Suzy right. Don't ambush her. It will be a blip to your bottom line to give her a decent severance package. And everyone will feel better about it—especially the remaining workforce. That is worth serious money to your company.

Now, I said I had something for you employees. When I am asked, I often tell people to not sign an “ambush package” when it is put in front of them. Unless the circumstances are particularly extenuating, there is no rush. It is true that the person who shoves it in your face will tell you, “I can't tell you what you will get if you don't sign this now.” They want to infer anything later will be worse. However, keep in mind, you are on your own now—the company is no longer on your side (they never were, but it didn't hurt for you to be comforted by the myth of that idea before) and you have to look out for you.

And with that I will leave you, the employee, with one final truism, “The one not in a hurry to settle wins any negotiation.” Think about it and you will agree—you have been taken advantage of in many automobile trades for this very reason. This is far more important than buying a new car.

For safety this week, we have mentioned this before. When turmoil strikes at work, and a firing is certainly turmoil, your greatest safety danger is driving and working around your home. You are greatly distracted.

Be safe and we will talk next week.