



One Snarky Comment Too Many

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QUESTION: I messed up. Last month in a moment of anger, I fired an assistant. She had been getting on my nerves. She had a snarky attitude and had made one sarcastic comment too many. I have had several discussions with her about the comments that I felt undermined me, but she did not change her ways. During a morning huddle, she made another snarky comment. I don't remember what she said, I just know I was mad. She was shocked, as I was, when I told her to leave and that she was terminated. Unfortunately, this exchange happened in front of the entire staff.

Although I am glad I fired her, I do wish I handled it better. My reaction has frightened my other employees who are now concerned that they could be next in line to bear my wrath. What can I do to assure them that this action was not a typical occurrence, but rather a onetime event?

I also recently received a request from a colleague I know, asking me for a reference on her. This ex-employee was good otherwise, but her mouth would prevent me from giving her a positive reference. Yet, I don't want to get in the way of her getting a new job. How should I handle it?

ANSWER: "Losing it" at the workplace does little for your reputation as a manager, as you found out. I agree that your actions may lead other employees to be concerned about the way you may treat them. There are a few things you can do to influence the staff's opinion of you, and actions speak louder than words. The most important thing to do now is to let the dust settle and go out of your way to treat your employees professionally and respectfully. If your staff did not see anything wrong with her comments, you are going to have more difficulty.

Hopefully, you have an employee handbook with policies for code of conduct and professional communication expectations for your office. If you don't have a handbook, or your handbook is missing this section, now is a good time to add it in. While it won't do much for the situation that has already occurred, it will reinforce your desire for a cooperative, positive, supportive workplace. With this, you have a document that can be used to hold employees accountable for the behavior and communication style you expect. Those who are not understanding or complying with this policy can be coached up or counseled out – in a measured, appropriate (and private) fashion.

The policy statement is only part of this solution though. You have to show your staff that the behavior you exhibited was an exception rather than a rule. This is done through your actions, and your actions alone. No matter how much you tell them, and they agree and say they understand, this little "losing it" episode will remain in their memories for years to come. From now on you need to show them that you

aren't prone to spontaneous terminations. People tend to remember the one bad thing that occurred rather than the 39 good things you did. Keep trying, count to ten, remain calm and don't let anyone push your buttons.

As far as the reference is concerned, I would ask for a signed authorization from the ex-employee with a "hold harmless" clause and retain a copy of it in your files. Then let the prospective employer lead with their questions. Do not answer questions unless the behavior has been documented in the employee's file. Only answer the questions asked and do not expand on them. Most people do not ask specific questions. Instead, they will ask a broad question like, "What kind of employee was she?" Answer the question in general terms, focusing on her work skills rather than her snarky ways. If asked why she is no longer working for you, be honest, but stick to the facts. Rather than saying "I lost it" when she made yet another snarky comment, instead say that you had difficulty with her communication style and she was no longer a good fit for your office.