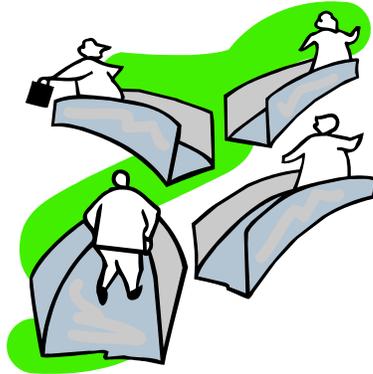


MANAGING THE STRESS OF MANAGING EMPLOYEES



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Managing your business while managing employees, whatever the number, can be very stressful. In this article, we will suggest some methods to minimize or even avoid stress associated with managing employees. The intent is to suggest strategies that will allow you to focus on managing your business while successfully managing your employees. For the most part, success with minimal stress is achieved by preparation and communication. In addition to reducing stress, this will also help avoid *litigation*.

For many people, HR is associated with hiring and firing. However, there are many facets involved in managing employees. Consider, for example, benefits, compensation, safety and training. To attract, retain and motivate employees to perform the critical activities needed to achieve business success, you need to understand what the competition offers, where you can find the critical skills and attitudes you need and what candidates and employees value regarding the work place. In addition, you need to be in compliance with employment laws and regulations to reduce the risk and the stress of fines and/or litigation.

What you don't know about managing employees can get you in trouble and cost you a lot. When in doubt, ASK! Many complex laws and regulations are associated with employees. An additional complexity is that regulations and laws change frequently. It is important that you understand federal and state regulations regarding employees. If you operate in multiple states, you need be sure that you are in compliance with each state's statutes as well. This is where the services of a Human Resources



consultant can be very helpful – they know the law and can assist you in staying in compliance. You wouldn't attempt to prepare your own income taxes without the aid of a professional. Apply the same principal to your Human Resources needs.

Part of planning is development and communication of policies and procedures. Policies and procedures serve as a guideline for management actions about employee issues. If you think in advance about how you will handle issues and what you expect of employees, and commit these decisions to writing, when you are confronted with a difficult employee issue, perhaps theft, sexual harassment, or unsatisfactory performance, you will have some basic guidelines for your responsive actions. Policies and procedures will provide a roadmap, but they do not have to hamper decisions based on the specific situation. However, planning may avoid or reduce stress associated with delivering bad news or explaining any personnel action. Policies related to performance management (appraisal), harassment, discrimination and discipline should definitely be included.

The best method of communicating policies and procedures, and identifying the expected employee code of conduct, is to distribute an Employee Handbook, which summarizes the policies and procedures. Up front communication about expectations and rules reduces misunderstandings and potential underperformance, which of course, will minimize stress of managing employees.

To communicate job expectations and potentially avoid significant fines and back pay, create job descriptions. Job description development takes time, but there are many potential payoffs, including avoiding or reducing the stress of being investigated by a governmental agency or being sued in a civil court. The analysis involved in developing a job description will determine if the position is eligible for overtime and minimum pay per hour under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). However, in some instances, you may pay either.

The job description is a multi-faced tool that will in turn reduce the time spent on employee management, in effect reducing your stress. Job descriptions are useful hiring employees because they specify the skills, experience and training or certifications required to perform a job. Having job descriptions will reduce your time to write ads or post open positions. They will help you develop legally compliant interview questions based on the job. And it is a tool that can be used in career planning and development of training needs.

A most productive tool to inform employees of expectations and feedback on job performance and attitude is the performance management process. Some refer to this as the appraisal. And for many, the most stressful day of the business year is the day when performance is discussed by the manager and the employee. Such a process requires planning on the part of the manager, but the time spent results in increased employee understanding of job performance expectations and increased job performance. Managers can reduce their stress around the *important* annual event by providing informal feedback regularly throughout the year. Reduce the stress of providing negative feedback, when necessary, by thorough preparation, research and rehearsal. Plan what you will say and how you will say it. Document it in writing after the meeting, including the response from the employee.



Finally, establish and maintain a safe environment and expect employees to commit to safe work environment behavior. It is not only good business, it is the law. Reduce the stress of on-the-job injuries or illnesses by focusing on safety, training regarding safety expectations and inspecting operations on a regular basis. Preparation and self-inspection will reduce the stress of OSHA visits and civil suits.

Employees (and former employees) sue for many reasons. It may not happen immediately after a perceived “unfair treatment” incident, but could happen later. Employees may file a charge with the EEOC or DOL when they terminate or get “fed up”. Your efforts to create/sustain a positive work environment will significantly help reduce your potential liability, but you will need to take the time to focus on it, get the assistance to do it right and implement employee practices and procedures that are in compliance.

Stay out of trouble and reduce stress by planning and communicating:

- Have good policies & procedures
- Follow the policies consistently but not slavishly
- Communicate the policies and expectations for employee performance consistently (Handbook)
- Train managers/supervisors and employees
- DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT

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