

Small Business: keeping toxic behavior out of the workplace

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If you've been in business long enough, chances are you've hired a toxic employee or two over the years.

If you haven't, you're lucky. Adding a single toxic employee to a team of 20 workers can cost an organization about \$12,800, including replacement costs from the turnover of both the toxic worker and the colleagues impacted by them, according to a new report by Cornerstone OnDemand.

Toxic behavior can include workplace violence, sexual harassment, fraud and violations of company policy, according to the report, which focused on the most egregious examples. But it can surface in more subtle ways, when an employee exhibits disengagement, negativity and disregard for authority, industry experts say.

Given what's at stake, it pays for companies to do a better job of vetting hires and acting quickly if an existing employee starts exhibiting toxic behavior.

"It can be a silent killer," explains Kim Cassady, vice president of talent at Cornerstone, a Santa Monica, California-based provider of cloud-based talent management solutions. It can seep into an organization and before you know it have a groundswell behind it, she notes.

Toxic employees are not team players and are prone to gossip, says Jennine Leale, president of HRPro Consulting Services LLC in Rockville Centre, a human resources outsourcing firm. "Sometimes they tend to bully other employees, making it uncomfortable for everybody."

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Know the signs: Trying to identify them before they enter an organization is key, she notes. For instance, self-proclaimed "rule followers" were 33 percent more likely to be toxic employees, according to the Cornerstone report.

They may need a lot of structure and be unable to flex for customer needs, Cassidy explains.

To help with the vetting process, organizations need to improve their interviewing skills and incorporate behavioral interviewing techniques, suggests David Javitch, president of Javitch Associates, a Newton, Massachusetts, organizational consulting firm.

Don't just ask questions with yes or no answers, he notes. Offer open-ended queries, such as "What would you do if . . .?" Or ask for an example of something they weren't able to do successfully, suggests Javitch.

Value-based questions can offer a lot of insight, notes Dan Ritchie, regional director of performance consulting at Dale Carnegie Training of Long Island in Hauppauge. For instance, ask for a high point in the person's life to see what it reveals about values, strength and character, and then about a low point and how he or she got through it.

You can recognize a "downer" personality by the way life experiences are related, notes Rita DiStefano, director of HR consulting at Portnoy, Messinger Pearl & Associates, Inc., a Syosset HR and labor relations consulting firm.

"I would ask, 'What was the most challenging situation you can remember in the past?' " says DiStefano, chairwoman of the board of HIA-LI. The answer may reveal if there's a lot of blame or negativity, a sign of a potentially toxic employee, she says.

Curb toxic behavior: Still, sometimes despite your best efforts, toxic employees get hired, DiStefano says. In those instances, you have to act fast.

You can point out the behavior and offer suggestions to help the staffer improve, Leale suggests.

Hopefully, you have already set expectations for the environment and expected behaviors you want, Cassidy says.

A serious offense could mean a verbal or written warning or immediate firing.

Either way, get it in writing. "Document all behaviors," Ritchie advises.

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