



Culture, Leadership, Strategic HR

5 ways to protect your organisation from a disgruntled former employee

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We've all heard horror stories about former employees turning on their employers, so how can you protect your organisation so employees don't try to burn it all down on their way out?

Karen Gately, founder of HR consultancy Corporate Dojo, has seen a lot of interesting employee behaviour during her career. But if you asked her about the most mind-blowing thing a former employee has done, one particular story stands out because it involved a member of the HR team.

According to Gately, the organisation had been downsizing and this HR manager had been tasked with handling the redundancies. After making most of their colleagues redundant, the HR manager was blindsided when the organisation's leaders turned around and made their position redundant too.

"The HR manager didn't even remotely see that the organisation was intending to make them redundant at the end of that process," says Gately.

On their way out, the employee emailed the entire organisation the spreadsheet containing information about the executive teams' salaries.

"They definitely felt hurt, and is probably why they lashed out," says Gately. "It was a very visible event that sent a shockwave through the whole organisation."

The organisation went into crisis mode. When the HR manager made such a public display of their resentment, it meant that the issues within the HR department were suddenly on display for the entire organisation to see. There were also ongoing problems with executives feeling betrayed due to the exposure of confidential information, and employees began to reassess their own salary expectations.

Unfortunately, stories like this aren't uncommon.

Rhonda Brighton-Hall, founder and director of HR consultancy mwah (Making Work Absolutely Human) has also seen her fair share of employee retaliation situations. Like Gately, there's also a particular story that stands out from the pack.

"There was an employee who was really fantastic at what he did, but he had a falling out with his boss and lost his job.

"When he left, he progressively started taking his team with him. He took five senior people over about three months. And then within 12 months, he took all their clients. It ruined the company."

So, why do they do it?

Some people are just spiteful, says Brighton-Hall, but often the issues stem from either a lack of respect for employees or poor leadership skills.

Gately echoes this, saying many feel hurt or betrayed by their organisation.

"Retaliation will often happen when the employee feels blindsided. When they feel like, 'I've put my heart and soul into this organisation and you don't care,'" she says.

What can organisations do?

Gately and Brighton-Hall say there are five key areas employers should consider to avoid the possibility of an employee retaliating.

1. Train leaders in conflict resolution

Brighton-Hall believes this the best thing employers can do.

“Take, for example, the employee who took the clients with them. If he’d had better leadership, and conflict resolution skills, that could have been avoided completely,” she says.

“He was good at his job and he was a nice guy. He just fell out with a manager and the company should have done a better job than letting that conflict drag out.”

All leaders should be taught these skills, says Brighton-Hall, and understand that it’s part of their job to handle conflict – not just brush it off to HR.

Gately says by not addressing conflict or feelings of resentment from an employee, you’re creating a ticking time bomb that will go off when they leave.

“If you actually deal with the problems, and you do it with respect and sensitivity, then employees are less likely to go off and try to find their own retribution,” she says.

This step is also important because dismissals don’t always happen in a vacuum, and other employees are likely to be impacted by it. This can take the form of [survivor syndrome](#) or resentment towards the decision-makers who terminated the employee.

“Leaders need to be able to handle the aftermath because there are always residual feelings when an employee is dismissed,” says Brighton-Hall.

2. Exit interviews

“Have a really good [exit interview](#) process, preferably an independent one, where the employee feels comfortable voicing their opinion,” says Brighton-Hall

“It’s hugely important when people are feeling disgruntled that they have an opportunity to say their piece.”

Most disgruntled employees feel that way for a reason. Not only is it beneficial for the organisation to get to the bottom of what’s going on (perhaps there is an management issue or poor team culture that you’re unaware of), it also makes the employee feel respected and therefore less likely to retaliate. Read HRM’s article on getting exit interviews right, [here](#).

3. Ongoing support

When someone loses their job, they sometimes end up with two things in excess: time and anger. To combat this, Brighton-Hall recommends continuing support for them where possible after the dismissal.

"If you can, get them some counselling to manage their feelings. You can also think of practical ways to help them find a new job and even transition help like, 'Here's how to move your super over,'" she says.

This is important, she says, because not only are you showing the former employee you care, but you're also demonstrating respect to your team.

"Your team knows this person. They might be close to them, so showing them that you did the right thing will combat any feelings of resentment that might build up in your [remaining] employees."

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4. Implement legal protections

[Employment contracts](#) should include clauses to protect your organisation from information theft post-employment.

The [law](#) already protects employers from employees exposing trade secrets, but adding specific clauses about what information can and can't be used post-employment will add an additional layer of protection to your organisation.

Employers can also use a [deed of release](#) (sometimes called a deed of settlement) when parting ways with an employee. This can often stop former employees from taking legal action against your organisation, disparaging their former employer, or revealing any confidential information about the employer.

A deed of release will also include a monetary settlement on top of any owed annual leave or unpaid wages. This settlement can put some employers off but, at the end of the day, this payment is likely to be cheaper than a lengthy court battle should the employee retaliate.

Brighton-Hall is quick to point out, however, that a deed of release shouldn't be used to sweep all issues under the carpet, and should be done in conjunction with the rest of the advice offered above. It's also best to engage a legal professional when drafting a deed to ensure it's fair and legally binding.

5. Block their access

"Employers should consider blocking the employee's access to technology and work email accounts. Also, the employee's personal email address should be blocked so they can't contact current employees," says Brighton-Hall.

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This can have a considerable negative impact on employee morale and culture, says Brighton-Hall.

It really all comes back to making employees feel respected.

"You're trying to give them the best chance you can to move on in a good way," says Brighton-Hall.

"And you're not just doing it for the former employee, but you're also showing your team that you care. Because they're watching and thinking, 'One day I'm going to leave and it's good this is how my employer behaves.'"

TAGS : conflict resolution, disgruntled employees, dismissal, leadership qualities



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