



Is Termination Ever Appropriate?

The purpose of investigating incidents is to improve processes, not to punish people. But there are situations where termination does make sense. It's clear-cut when an employee commits a criminal act or causes harm intentionally. But more often, it's difficult to determine whether termination is truly the best course of action for the company. Implementation of the HR disciplinary processes should be independent of the accident investigation process.

When a serious problem arises, termination might feel logical—or even satisfying. But consider this: You've likely invested a lot in this employee, and they may be **among the best people** to reveal how to prevent similar problems in the future. Their first-hand insights are invaluable, and they're often best equipped to share the story in a way that fosters trust within the team. Letting them go has lasting impacts—not only on them but also on company culture and morale. Even when warranted, firing someone doesn't reliably prevent future problems. Here's how I navigate these decisions and go beyond termination to address deeper issues.

When Termination Becomes the Right Call

One memorable case involved a field operator and a mechanic working on a pump. They hadn't realized that the pump piping was under pipe strain, but they did see that the dike surrounding it was filled with sulfuric acid.

While performing the task, the mechanic disconnected a piece of tubing, causing sulfuric acid to splash onto his face—some of it landing just beneath his safety glasses.

In the investigation, the person who issued the work permit and the mechanic performing the task were both interviewed. Both had an opportunity to recognize that the dike filled with sulfuric acid was a hazard. Interviews revealed that the mechanic, along with others in his team, viewed this job as a routine "quick five-minute task" that didn't need a hazard analysis. Because he recognized his own failure to identify the risk, and to request safe working conditions from the permit writer, we did not terminate him.

On the other hand, the person who permitted the work saw the acid in the dike but didn't feel it was necessary to empty it, stating, "I don't know what the big deal is." He understood the risk, but clearly had a personal tolerance for it that didn't align with the company's risk tolerance. In the end, he was terminated—a difficult decision, given the resources invested in his development. But even after that, we knew that firing alone wouldn't solve the problem.

Don't Just Fire—Fortify Your Process

Even when termination is justified, it rarely prevents the problem from happening again. This is true even in cases where an employee knowingly disregards safety or fails to meet the company's standards, as was the case with the person who permitted the work on the pump. Letting one person go may remove immediate risk, but it won't address underlying issues such as unclear procedures and lack of oversight.

You need to dig deeper by asking:

- **How did this person get into the company in the first place?** Was something missed in the hiring or onboarding process that signaled misalignment with the company's values or risk tolerance?
- **Did any peers notice behaviors that could have prevented this outcome?** Sometimes, coworkers see red flags but feel hesitant to report them. Assessing communication and feedback pathways can highlight areas for improvement.
- **Why didn't leaders catch this problem sooner?** Dig into your evaluation and supervision processes to identify where oversight could be strengthened.

Similarly, if termination follows repeated mistakes or rule-breaking, it's essential to look at opportunities to **strengthen processes** to prevent this pattern of behavior. Have you identified process metrics that will allow you to catch small issues early? Are you conducting after-action reviews to learn from both failures and successes? Establishing regular feedback and review loops can reveal early warning signs and create opportunities for improvement.

If you're dealing with someone **repeatedly skirting rules**, ask if there are ways to make compliance easier. For instance, if an employee resists wearing gloves, it may be because the gloves don't fit well, make the task more difficult, or aren't readily available when needed. Instead of guessing, ask the people doing the work what they think would be an effective solution. They almost always have great ideas. Additionally, reinforce the "why" behind compliance, emphasizing how PPE isn't just "the rule" but a real means of avoiding serious, life-altering injuries. Positive peer pressure can be a great way to reinforce the "why" of compliance and foster a safety culture.

Termination Isn't the Fix—It's the First Clue

Termination is always a last resort, but it should never be the last action you take to solve a problem. Termination is a signal to investigate the work processes that allow small problems to develop and go unchecked until they become firing offenses. By investigating these processes, you can uncover the causes behind workplace challenges and identify opportunities for improvement.