



MARKETING / OFFICE / STAFF

## How to Handle the "F" Word

Steven Visentin

Have you ever been fired? It's terrible, nasty business, especially if you're on the receiving end. Most people are doing their best, and when they're terminated, they can become furious. If it's handled incorrectly, some people may even try to sue you for doing what's best for your practice.

Let's talk about how to avoid lawsuits by letting people go in a way that's as gentle as possible; doing so can be the best thing you can do for your patients and your own sanity. We'll start by discussing why firing someone is so emotionally charged and difficult to do, and why we delay ending these relationships.

### Why We Delay

There is never a convenient time to let someone go. If you have to fire someone, their post will be empty, and in a busy clinic, the remaining staff will have to scramble until a replacement is hired and trained.

Another reason you may delay is because you will have to admit you hired the wrong person. Ultimately, the clinic owner is responsible. After investing money, time and energy in hiring and training, it's tough to admit you've made a mistake.

It's not always easy to select the right employee. During the hiring process, you can't ask questions that often impact employee performance, such as, "What medications are you on?" "What disabilities do you have?" "Are you pregnant?" "Do you have children?"

The prospective employee is on their best behavior during the job interview. Interviewing may be the only real skill they have. No wonder you can make mistakes hiring.

Finally, you may dread going through the hiring process again and retraining someone who may not be any better.

### Office Policy



An office policy is essential in outlining your expectations for a new employee. It outlines what the rules are and the benefits they could enjoy working for you.

A good office policy also has a 90-day trial period. If for any reason you or the new employee is dissatisfied, either party can discontinue the relationship. This is a clean way to part with as little "drama" as possible. Before you consider another applicant, make sure they sign an office policy with a clause for termination.

#### When Not to Terminate

It's illegal to fire someone for reasons of age, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, pregnancy, or disabilities. It's also illegal to fire someone who has missed work due to a condition defined by the [Family and Medical Leave Act \(FMLA\)](#).

If you're thinking of letting someone go, talk to your lawyer first, especially if your employee happens to be older, pregnant or belong to another protected group.

#### Three Strikes and You're Out

One way to avoid misunderstandings is to have the patient sign warnings. You can fire someone without a warning, but it's not as clean.

A possible downside to this intervention is that if not given properly, warnings can de-motivate people. Always make it clear that a particular behavior is an issue, not the individual. Of course, this discipline should be done in private, in writing and with encouragement for a better performance in the future. The employee should sign it and be given a copy.

Done improperly, the employee may quit emotionally after a warning. They'll show up for work, but never fully engage. Be as gentle, positive and motivating as you can to avoid this from happening.

## Who to Fire

If you ever get the feeling someone else might do a job a little better, it's time to let an employee go. In most instances, it should have been done long ago. The law allows you to fire employees for *no reason at all*. If their attitude is less than enthusiastic or they refuse to do a part of their job, release them.

Famous football coach [Vince Lombardi](#) once said, "If you're not fired with enthusiasm, you will be fired with enthusiasm." If you've been in practice for more than a few weeks, you know the signs of someone who should not be working for you. Don't ignore apathy, excuses, endless arguments, lateness, absenteeism, gossiping, and people who make their problems yours. If you can't trust them, just let them go!

The wrong person can affect your statistics. If you've stopped growing or there is a sudden downward trend, check yourself first. You're the leader. Are *you* still 100 percent in every aspect of your life? If it's not you, stop ignoring the signs that the tree needs to be pruned to encourage growth.

### "Give Me the Key and Then I'll Give You the Check"

The best time to terminate someone is usually the end of the week. Of course, you want to make sure patients are not in the clinic. Have someone act as witness. Don't just say, "You're fired." Use this type of language instead: "I have to let you go today. This will be your last day with us, so please take all your things with you." Tell them why they can no longer work for you. Tell them the truth.

Don't say things like, "I know how you feel." This is gut wrenching, awful business. It's not easy to do and it's terrible to be dismissed. Do your best to release them in the most dignified way possible. Have tissues ready. Have them take their things with them and escort them out. Tell the other employees what happened, but certainly don't gossip about it. Change the locks and passwords just in case.

This may be the hardest thing you have to do. Be strong, do it decisively at the right time and in the kindest, but most honest way possible. You'll reap your just rewards. Your practice *will* grow again.

JANUARY 2019