



Eight Elements of a Dignified Separation

An employee separation is never an easy situation, regardless of the circumstances. However, having a well-planned and empathetic separation strategy in place can go a long way in preserving the dignity of the exiting employee and maintaining morale among the remaining staff. When an employee feels they have been treated with respect and consideration during the termination process, they are much less likely to harbor resentment towards the organization. This can help protect the company's reputation and prevent the spread of negative sentiment that could impact employee retention and recruitment efforts. A separation strategy that provides support resources, clear communication, and, in applicable cases, severance benefits demonstrates that the company values its employees, even in difficult situations.

Moreover, the remaining employees are always watching how their colleagues are treated, especially during emotional events like terminations. If they witness a termination process that seems callous, abrupt, or degrading, it can severely undermine morale and erode trust in leadership. This insecurity and demoralization make it harder for the remaining staff to feel engaged and motivated in their work. Conversely, when employees see a separation handled with professionalism, empathy, and structured transition support, it reinforces their perception of the organization's ethics and care for its workforce.

Meridian Resources has been supporting organizations to ensure dignity in separations since 2000. We offer the following eight elements to consider when planning your strategy.

1. Establish a location

Designating an appropriate location for any separation event is essential to a dignified termination. Blindsiding the employee by catching them off-guard or giving them the news in a public location where they cannot freely express their immediate thoughts or feelings may create a volatile situation for the employee and those within their work circle. It is important to allow the employee time to absorb the news in private and not be forced into contact with other employees immediately after a separation event.

Termination meetings are best delivered in neutral territory such as the employee's office, or an office such as human resources. The meeting should be in a location that allows for full privacy from other employees during and immediately following the separation event. If conducted in the employee's office, you also allow for the employee to have immediate access to their personal belongings so that they may immediately depart the building after the meeting. You may also set a time outside of regular business hours for the employee to return to pack their office. When on the company property, a separated employee should be under constant supervision for safety and security purposes. While they may balk at being "watched" simply explain it is for their protection as well.

2. Consider the timing

Timing has everything to do with terminating an employee with dignity. While there is never a good time to let an employee go, there are times that are better than others. Do not plan a separation meeting during a period when employee traffic is high – arrival, lunch break, and departures. Our experience has shown that a meeting mid-day is best.

As for the day of the week, a notification mid-week allows a separated employee time to review separation documentation and have access to human resources, their direct supervisor, or other sources of advice or counsel. On the contrary, a separation on Friday creates a situation where they may be unable to access help that can provide relief and forward progression.

Give careful consideration when it comes to notifications that fall during holidays, vacations, birthdays, business meetings, or trips. Before setting the date of the notification, ask yourself "Is this a good day to inform the individual, or should we postpone the meeting until a more appropriate time?" This will lessen the trauma of the event and help the employee better cope with the situation.

3. Develop a plan to deliver the message

Creating a plan for the delivery of the message is critical. The immediate supervisor or manager should be the responsible party for delivering the message, ideally one-on-one. If necessary, a second party may be present but should be instructed to only function as a witness.

Often companies desire outplacement consultants to be on-site to be the first person that a departing employee speaks with after learning they have lost their job. While this is a well-intended handoff, it defeats the purpose of helping the employee move forward. Consider how you would feel if you just lost your job and were escorted to another room to sit with a stranger to talk about your reaction, feelings, and how to move forward. A dignified termination allows the employee time to privately absorb and process the news for a brief period of time before the introduction of an outplacement service provider via phone.

4. Prepare your team

Once you have established who will deliver the news, you should create an outline and script for the meeting. Create a checklist of logistics and meet with notification managers to ensure a dignified exit meeting for each employee. Provide training and support to managers regarding essential documentation, and addressing questions and concerns that may arise.

5. Display compassion

A separation meeting will always have an emotional element. It is important to recognize the emotional impact on both parties—the deliverer and the recipient. Often, terminated employees were more upset about how the message was delivered than the message itself. This lack of human touch can make it even harder for the employee to move forward.

The deliverer of the message may experience the very same emotions as the recipient such as guilt, fear, anxiety, anger, and resistance. Informing someone that they are losing their job is never easy, regardless of the circumstances. It is important for the deliverer to recognize that their emotions are normal. By allowing themselves to identify their own emotions permits them to be more empathetic to the recipient, but they should not convey their emotions during the notification. It is the emotions of the recipient that must have exclusive priority during the meeting.

6. Manage the emotional response

When planning and delivering a termination, expect the unexpected. Quite often the emotional response to the news is the opposite of what you might anticipate. The quiet and reserved employee has a strong emotional reaction and the hot-tempered employee takes the news gracefully and exits peacefully.

A common response to the news is shock, disappointment, and possibly anger. The employee may display passive acceptance and concern regarding next steps. They may be quiet or ask a lot of questions. Some may even cry. The deliverer should allow the employee to express their feelings, but not probe. They should not offer false hope or promises of special treatment and above all they should remain supportive and neutral. When in doubt, return to the script.

In some cases, an employee may lack a reaction. This should send an alert to the deliverer. They may be in shock. It is good to allow a brief period of silence to allow the employee to absorb the news. The deliverer may need to repeat the message and ask if the employee understands what they are saying. A rational response to the news is desired before the employee is released.

An out-of-control response rarely occurs, however, there is always the possibility of an employee who may become hysterical or violent. The deliverer needs to remain calm and inform the employee that violent or aggressive behavior is not acceptable. The employee should be allowed to vent appropriately so that they can exit the facility in a controlled manner.

7. Create a controlled exit strategy

Proper planning and preparation for an employee's exit after the meeting is essential. Even if the employee is to remain working for a period of time, they should leave for the remainder of the day. This allows them time to absorb and reflect on the change in the privacy of their home, and prevents a negative response from impacting other employees. The separated employee should be politely escorted until they leave the building for the protection of all parties.

A pre-departure checklist should be created in advance to determine how best to handle the transition. These items may include when and how the employee can retrieve their personal belongings and the transfer of company property and information. If at all possible, consider a dignified way to transition company property such as a phone, computer, or car. Putting an employee in a situation where they immediately lose the ability to communicate and travel can put undue stress on the situation.

Consider ways that company property and information can be protected while providing a period of transition or alternatives to the employee at the time of separation. If you allow the employee to keep a computer for a transition period, company files should be copied or purged before they have access to it. Other items that might not be as sensitive can be picked up during a time arranged between the manager and the employee, most preferably after hours. You should allow for personal items to be taken home on the day of the notification.

8. Communicate with survivors

An often overlooked post-notification issue is taking care of those that remain. Survivors may experience negative reactions to the event. To maintain morale, management should be visible and receptive to those who remain. The remaining employees may experience anger, guilt, resentment, relief, uncertainty about their future, confusion about workload or duties, and resentment about increased workload.

A meeting with employees immediately following the employee's departure to explain what has happened and how the change will directly impact them is an important first step after notification. How management portrays how the event was handled, will have a significant impact on the emotion, morale, and productivity of the employees.

As a safeguard, instruct employees to immediately report any suspicious behavior or threats against the company or its employees to appropriate personnel. Tighten security on the day of the notification and keep it in place for a gradual cool-down period for as long as necessary. Management can anticipate morale and productivity to drop as those who remain may feel vulnerable. Create an open-door policy for individual discussions to address concerns.

A well-executed employee separation strategy is essential for protecting the dignity of the exiting employee, maintaining morale and trust among remaining staff, and upholding the organization's reputation. By following these best practices, companies can navigate this difficult scenario with professionalism and empathy and subsequently preserve workplace morale and their employer brand through a dignified separation process.

If you need additional support to plan your separation strategy, we are here to help!



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