

## How to Effectively Deal with Employees' Complaints

Part of being an employer is handling the complaints of your employees. While some larger employers have involved dispute resolution and arbitration procedures, informal procedures are often the best method for the small business owner. And for the business with only one or two employees, it's not necessary to specify how you'll handle complaints before they happen. Deal with each situation as it arises on a case-by-case basis.

Whatever method you use, if an employee complains about an employment-related situation, you should be prepared to handle it in a fair and consistent manner.

### Informal Complaint Procedures

As a business, you probably don't want to spend the time and resources or have the need to develop an involved procedure for dealing with employee complaints. Instead, you may want to have some general guidelines so that employees know what to do if they have a complaint. A set of basic procedures helps you make sure that you treat all complaints in a consistent manner.

Your informal complaint procedure can be just about anything you want to make it. Some common procedures are:

- An open door policy
- Periodic employee meetings

**Open door policy.** An open door policy is just what it sounds like. Basically, you make it known to employees that when they have a problem or complaint, they are free to come to you with it. This is a good approach if you have a relatively small number of employees and a reasonably happy workforce. On the other hand, if you have a lot of employees with many problems, you're setting yourself up for day after day of meetings with employees.



TIP

If you adopt the open door policy, make it known that, while employees can come to you at any time, a detailed follow-up on their complaint or problem might not take place at that moment, depending on your schedule or business commitments. Explain that, in some cases, an appointment will have to be scheduled when the employee can come in and discuss the issue with you.

**Periodic employee meetings.** If your employees work as a team or if work requires periodic meetings anyway, you may want to allot some time during your meeting for complaints or problems that employees can share. This approach allows you to address an issue only once instead of individually. Allow employees the opportunity to speak with you apart from the group. Some problems or complaints may not be suitable for group discussion.

**Communicating your policy.** Be sure to communicate basic information to employees about what to do if they have a complaint. In a "policy" of this sort:

- Explain that your business cares about its employees and wants to help solve any workplace problems that may arise
- Encourage employees to come forward with problems and assure them they will be taken seriously, kept confidential, and handled fairly and consistently
- Explain how employees should go about voicing a complaint (visit in person, submit a written complaint, schedule a time)

### Handling Employees' Complaints Thoroughly and in a Timely Fashion

An alternative to having a traditional complaint procedure is to address complaints as they arise. This may be an effective approach for a business with only one or two employees.



TIP

However, you may find that even though you have only a few employees, you are spending a lot of time dealing with complaint-oriented issues. If this is the case, you may want to consider a more formal complaint procedure to help you get control of how complaints are handled. It could end up saving you some time and help you ensure that complaints are handled fairly and consistently.

An added benefit of having a procedure in place is that requiring employees to follow procedures may curtail aimless complaining or griping that they may feel is justified because you do not have a specific policy governing complaints.

## Handling Your Employees' Complaints

Whatever the type of dispute or complaint resolution procedure - either an informal procedure or a case-by-case approach - it should do the following:

- Resolve disputes in a timely manner
- Provide a binding resolution
- Involve those who must live with the decision
- Be externally defensible, in case the decision is subsequently challenged
- Be perceived as being fair overall

If employees feel that they are being treated with respect and fairness, they are more likely to accept the resolution you suggest, even if it is not exactly what they wanted or expected.

To show that you take all complaints seriously, you'll want to take the following action:

- Make sure that you understand the problem. Allow the employee to talk without interruption.
- Ask questions until you have a clear understanding of the facts. If the employee discusses the problem in generalities, probe for specific facts.
- Ask the employee what he or she would like to see in the way of a resolution. If the employee wants another employee fired over a minor problem, there may be more to the employee's anger than meets the eye.
- Remain calm and in control; do not lose your temper or become accusatory.
- Establish a record by taking notes. This will also assure the employee that you are taking the matter seriously. You may want to have the employee write down the complaint, as well. This can be part of the formal documentation.
- Repeat the complaint. This will ensure that you and the employee agree on the facts and the issues.
- Don't make a decision until you have obtained all the facts. If you must talk to others, explain that to the employee. Also explain that you cannot act on a complaint until you have the other party's side of the story. It is better to postpone a decision than to make one that you would regret or reverse later.
- Check to see if any of the business's other policies (if there are any) address the problem. Have there been other similar cases? How were they handled in the past?
- Consider the source and gather information about the complaining employee. The more you know about the employee, the easier it will be to handle the complaint.
- Advise the employee of the decisions as soon as possible. Determine the most appropriate time and place to meet with the employee.
- If the employee's complaint is without merit, explain it to the employee in a pleasant, low-key manner.
- If the complaint is sound, thank the employee for calling it to your attention so that you can resolve it.
- Follow through with corrective action as soon as possible. Delay may result in other problems.
- Check back with the employee after taking action in order to determine if the issue has been completely resolved to his or her satisfaction.