

May 16: HR Hot Seat: Answering Your Most Urgent HR Questions

The term “member” applies to those who attended the Roundtable and contributed by speaking or in the chat. Individual names and library names are not used to keep information anonymous.

The icebreaker was “How do you like your potatoes?” Everyone enjoyed potatoes in a variety of ways including mashed, twice-baked, and sweet potato fries.

Q: What is the best or proper way to reduce an employee’s wages?

Without knowing more about the situation, the following discussion occurred.

A member mentioned something they’d learned in a recent webinar: Change in thinking from “What *should* I do?” to “What *could* I do?” Instead of saying there’s one best or proper way to do something, look at it instead of as “What are my options. What could I do?”

The decision to take away something from an employee is a really big decision and there has to be a reason for doing so. Be sure to fully understand the reason for *why* you’re taking things away before making that decision and then explain this to the employee.

It’s important to also consider who else might be involved? Are you reducing wages or taking something away from only one employee or multiple? If it’s one person, are there other employees they may talk or complain to, in which case, you might need to talk to those people as well about the why.

Another member gave a few potential examples for reducing wages: Maybe the employees current duties no longer match what they were hired for (reclassification of their role if their duties have drastically shifted). Maybe they took a lower earning position. Is reducing wages part of a cost saving measure?

This member then provided an example from their past experience. They had an employee apply for a position that was two pay levels *below* their current position. The decision was made to keep the employee’s salary the same after hiring. However, as they were now over the max salary of the new position, they wouldn’t receive a salary increase until it fell below the salary max for that position. They could have decided to reduce the person’s salary but in this instance, the library decided not to as the budget was stable. They grandfathered the salary into the employee’s new contract.

Asked in the chat: What if employee continues to underperform even with repeated coaching?

A member shared a time they did have an instance where an individual’s salary was decreased as a disciplinary/corrective action. The member wanted to terminate the employee but the Executive Director wasn’t willing to do that. The compromise was the person demoted from a

department manager and moved to a cataloger position. The member doesn't remember what the pay reduction was but thinks it might have been 10%. This was an odd situation and not the norm. Typically, if you're dealing with normal performance issues, potentially consider termination.

Other things to consider:

- Is the job not good match for their skills?
- Is there a better position available for them?
- Would wage decrease be a one-time thing?
- How would it affect compensation scale, especially if you're trying to meet the average pay scale?

There's a saying: You're paying for the *position*, not the *person*. You don't want to take any action today that will hurt you down the road. If you reduce the salary now and then eventually have to hire a new person, you may have to hire them at the higher, average wage but you no longer have that in the budget.

Another member brought up that organizational restructuring or benchmarking (which determines the position based on industry standards) may also be reasons for lowering salaries. Benchmarking may come back lower than what you originally budgeted for. Then you'd want to have an option to determine the significance of the industry's changes and whether or not to keep the person at the same salary/wage. This is where performance may play a role in how to address the issue.

From this member's HR experience, demotion or reclassification of a role aren't necessarily the best standard of practice. Regarding performance issues, make sure that all infractions and transgressions are well-documented. Be sure you're enforcing your policy's progressive disciplinary step process and/or performance improvement plan (PIP) process to get the employee back on track. If, after this, the employee is still having performance issues, or isn't progressing in a sustainable way, then you should consider suspension without pay or even termination. There might be some potential legal implications for reducing a person's pay (does the job itself *require* a specific compensation, for instance) so if you're unsure, always check with a lawyer.

Q. What is the process to terminate an employee with dignity?

How this is done says a lot about you as an employer or you as an HR representative or supervisor.

No matter the reason for termination – whether based on performance, reductions in force, etc. - there's no *good* time to terminate an employee. There might be *better* times but no such thing

as a good time and no *best* way. Don't be concerned with what day of the week or what time you decide to do it. Do what fits for those involved.

One member brought up that in their current role, termination handled by the direct supervisor and the member's role in the termination is as HR support. The member writes the script for the supervisor, alert IT if needed, schedule the room, get the benefit info together, get everything aligned. It's not an easy conversation and they don't want the supervisor to stumble. They provide talking points and try to spell it out and make it as simple as possible. It's 3-5 sentences max. The supervisor says what they need to say and then is handed off to HR - here's the benefits, last day of pay, last paycheck date, here's your final documentation or it will be sent to you by this date. Likes to let the supervisor know "This is a difficult conversation for you. It's okay to acknowledge and say that to the person you're terminating. 'Please bear w/ me while I read from my notes.'"

To employee: "I know this doesn't feel good." Hopefully it isn't a surprise to the person being terminated. "I'm sure what you've just heard may be a shock to you and you may not remember anything else I say, but please try to remember this – *last day, questions of pay, paycheck date, and provide business card* – please feel free to follow up with me." This is also a good time to provide EAP information.

This member's personal philosophy is to not escort the terminated employee off the property. You don't want to draw more attention to the person or situation. Security or supervisor may be aware and keep an eye on the terminated employee, but they're not watching them pack their desk/items or escorting them to the door.

Another member brought up being sure to be in legal compliance to terminate. Have you addressed issues in performance? Is it just a reduction in staff? Be sure to have everything fully documented. For this person, their legal department/person is also involved to determine if there's any risk (retaliatory considerations, protected class). Depending on what department or person being terminated will determine if the manager needs backup during the termination process. Typically, it is the manager doing the termination. Sometimes an HR person will be asked to be present. They don't want anyone who's not necessary to the termination to be there.

Make sure termination is done privately. Ideally, do it in person. Circumstances may require doing it via video conference or phone call. Be sure to keep it brief, clear, and respectful. Don't rehash the past or debate the situation. Try to be empathetic but firm in your language. Provide unemployment info if applicable, any other info they need, COBRA info, etc.

There's lots of debate about the *best* time to terminate. There really isn't a best time. One member's organization's standard is to try and do terminations towards the end of the week,

often in the morning. Considerate – is it cruel to let them do a full day of work and then fire? They won't delay termination if immediate firing is necessary but otherwise, they try to do it towards the end of week. Ensure access is removed if necessary – keys, key cards/fobs, logins. Sometimes they will escort the person off the premises, depending on if they believe it will be needed. They have had instances where the terminated employee doesn't want to leave. On the flip side, depending on the temperament of the person, they've let people pack up their things and then go around and say their goodbyes.

One member asked: What if HR overrules the supervisor's decision and wants to terminate?

This depends on the organizational structure. What authority does HR have? Who has the ultimate authority? 99% of time, HR's role is as a consultant, not the one making the decision.

More often, HR gives a recommendation for termination that is then rejected; it's typically not the other way around. If a supervisor doesn't want to fire but HR does, not terminating the employee may set a bad precedent. The employee has outright violated this policy or would violate the integrity of the organization if they aren't terminated. Always have strong support (and legal support if possible) for termination.

For legal support, it's not necessary to have a lawyer on staff. You can outsource and there may be options for an annual contract or benefits through other entities, such as HR Source.

Shared in chat by staff liaison: ILA has an online [Associate Member Directory](#), sorted by category. Associate members are companies and organizations that work closely with the library community and include lawyers, consultants, architects, and many more.

A final word of advice for handling terminations -always have a box of Kleenex.