How to Fire an Employee

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Firing an employee is never easy, but this method allows the employee to leave with their dignity intact. Author’s address: Summit Veterinary Advisors, LLC, 10354 West Chatfield Avenue, Suite 103, Littleton, CO 80127; e-mail: Leslie@SummitVeterinaryAdvisors.com. © 2011 AAEP.

1. Introduction
Donald Trump has made millions from the phrase, “You’re fired!” For the rest of us, terminating an employee is one of the most difficult situations that a supervisor faces. After you have made the decision to let an employee go, what are you supposed to say and do next? When is the right time of day or day of the week to fire someone? Do you confront them in public, invite them to a quiet lunch, call, or e-mail them with the news?

This how to report does not provide legal advice on the ramifications of terminating an employee. We will operate under the assumptions that proper documentation is in place, progressive disciplinary procedures have been taken, and you have consulted your attorney or local employers’ council.

2. Goals
Decide when the employee’s last day will be and terminate her on that day. Conventional wisdom used to advise letting people go on Friday so that they had the weekend to regroup and start a job search Monday morning. That concept may have been true back when people responded to help wanted ads in the Sunday classifieds. Now that job listings are available 24 h/day and 7 days/wk, just pick a day that makes sense to you. You might choose the last day in the pay period or the end of the workweek. Do not pick the day before you head out of town, because you leave your staff behind to pick up the pieces. The best time of day is when the fewest people are in the practice, usually first thing in the morning, over lunch, or at the end of the day.

A firing should never come as a surprise to the employee. It is merely the last step in progressive discipline. Do not try to take the easy way out by firing someone over the phone or by e-mail. A face to face conversation is expected and underlines the importance of the conversation. Have someone else in the room with you, preferably someone of the same gender as the employee. This practice may help put the employee at ease and provide a third party observer, which may reduce the potential for drama. Most of us are on better behavior in front of a witness.

Start the conversation with your decision: “I’ve made a difficult decision; I have to let you go.” Be direct and specific. Sometimes, we try to soften the blow by easing into the news. However, dragging things out just prolongs the torture. An elaborate setup may give the impression that your decision is not final and that, in the face of a strong rebuttal, you could change your mind. Because it is not the case, get to the point quickly.

Keep the conversation relatively short. Do not enter into a debate. Do not justify or explain any-
thing. Your decision is final, and the time for back and forth conversation is over. If needed, keep repeating, “I’ve made my decision; I have to let you go.”

Then, focus on the transition. Cover logistics, like returning keys and other property, when the final check will be issued, etc. It may be uncomfortable, but make sure that the employee’s belongings are gathered up before leaving. Have a box or two on hand so that there is no reason to postpone. Find small ways to give the employee some control. For example, offer the employee the opportunity to resign rather than be fired and provide a specific deadline for submitting a letter of resignation. If they choose to resign, you can tell references, truthfully, that the employee decided to leave.