By Cynthia Matossian, MD, FACS

Cynthia Matossian, MD, FACS, is the founder of Matossian Eye Associates. Her e-mail is cmatossian@matossianeye.com.

How to let an employee go

Follow a strict protocol when dismissing a staff member.

When I opened Matossian Eye Associates 28 years ago, I had only two employees. We didn't have much need for a human resources department. As the practice expanded to three locations across two states, it became necessary to establish a protocol for what to do if an employee had to be fired.

Here's our approach to employee infractions, a guide on how we address problems when they do arise and what we do after terminating an employee.

OUTLINE EXPECTATIONS

Employees need to know the rules and expectations. We give each new hire our employee manual on his or her first day. Since the manual is more than 25 pages long, we realize that no employee will read it in detail. Instead, we read two pages aloud at each staff meeting explaining points as we go along. The handbook outlines everything from "code of conduct" to vacation policy. Along with the handbook, employees are handed a written job description that explicitly establishes each individual's responsibilities.

These measures help assure us that every member of the staff is fully aware of what we expect from them and our protocol for violations.

PROTOCOL FOR VIOLATIONS

If an employee violates the code of conduct, we first schedule a meeting with the employee, a supervisor and the administrator to discuss the matter. For example, if the employee is tardy on a regular basis, the team will review the number of times the employee was remiss, then issue a first warning.

At our disciplinary meetings, we go into greater detail. In this example, we might ask why the employee is persistently late and if there's anything the practice can do to help to resolve the problem.

If the problem persists we have a second meeting with the same team. We again issue a written warning, but this time the warning indicates that if the problem doesn't improve, the employee will be terminated.

TERMINATION

If a third violation occurs, the employee is terminated. But our job isn't finished. To avoid any loose ends, we schedule an exit interview with that employee. At the interview, we collect the person's key and any other proprietary materials. The person's final paycheck is withheld until these items are returned. By the end of the business day on an employee's last day, his or her e-mail is deactivated and access to our records is suspended. We generate a new employee group e-mail list and share the revised version with all staff.

Because we operate out of two states, our practice administrator has to remain apprised of all the relevant regulations and state worker's rights.

We make sure our employees know how much we value them; it is rare that an employee leaves. The few times we have had to let someone go, the employee had a solid understanding of the reasons. **OM**