Prepare for the fire and you'll be spared the burn

By Sally McKenzie, CMC

A few months back a major American company fired an employee over electronic communication. The surge of publicity wasn’t because it had just made some note-worthy accomplishment or released a new product, or won a major award for best in customer service; it was because this employee was fired for what she had written. The employee was a position of some prominence within the company, but the news was not about the business that she had done for them, or the name of the company she was fired from. The problem was the communication she used to do her work. It is a sad commentary on the worrisome state of our society and its ability to communicate. Perhaps it should have come as no surprise that this story is not a new one. For years we have seen and heard about similar stories of employees who were fired for sending inappropriate emails, reports of specialists who had been terminated for sending inappropriate emails, reports of sales people who had been fired for sending inappropriate emails. I am not singling this employee out, nor am I suggesting that this was the worst of the lot. It was one of many stories that have surfaced in recent years and this is not the first time that this has come to light. The story is a reminder that we still have a long way to go with regard to thinking about the nature of our electronic communication and how it impacts the way we do business.

Some of you may be thinking, “But Sally, I don’t have anyone in my business who would do that!” Well, you might want to think again because the problem is more widespread than you may think. In fact, a recent study published by the American Management Association found that 75% of the respondents reported that they knew of at least one employee who had been fired for sending inappropriate emails. While this is concerning, it is even more disturbing when you consider that the number of employees who have been fired for sending inappropriate emails is likely to be much higher than the 75% reported. There are a number of reasons why this might be the case. One is that employees may be afraid to report inappropriate behavior because they fear retaliation. Another is that employees may not be aware of the policies that govern their email use. And, of course, there is the possibility that employees do not understand the impact that their actions can have on the organization. In any case, the fact remains that this is a problem that needs to be addressed.

I recommend that you avoid firing your employees for what they say on the job but try to avoid it by training your employees or having clear expectations. I also suggest that you create a Code of Conduct that includes specific guidelines for electronic communication. This code should be communicated to all employees and should be included in the employee handbook. If you are already doing this, great! If not, you might want to consider doing so. In this way, you can help ensure that your employees understand what is expected of them and what consequences they may face if they do not follow the rules. It is also important to note that electronic communication is not just about what employees say or do, it is also about what they see and hear. This is why it is important to have policies in place that govern the use of electronic communication.

As you think about these issues, I hope that you will keep in mind that electronic communication is not just a tool for business, it is a tool for life. We all use it every day and we all have a responsibility to use it responsibly. If you are not sure how to start, I suggest that you begin by having a discussion with your employees about what is expected of them when it comes to electronic communication. You might also consider having a training session on the topic. In this way, you can help ensure that your employees understand the importance of electronic communication and what they can do to use it effectively.

I would also like to remind you that electronic communication is not just a problem for businesses, it is a problem for all of us. We all use it every day and we all have a responsibility to use it responsibly. If you are not sure how to start, I suggest that you begin by having a discussion with your family and friends about what is expected of them when it comes to electronic communication. You might also consider having a training session on the topic. In this way, you can help ensure that your family and friends understand the importance of electronic communication and what they can do to use it effectively.

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