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Employee Pranks - No Joke Even on April Fools

Firefighters decided to play a practical joke on one of their own. When the dust settled, the city paid the pranked firefighter \$1.5 million, paid \$1.3 million in legal fees, and faced the resignation of the fire chief.

The target of the joke filed a lawsuit after he was served a spaghetti dinner that, unknown to him, contained dog food during his shift at the fire station. His co-workers described the incident as a prank played on the 6-foot-5-inch firefighter because of his nickname "Big Dog." However, the firefighter alleged it was due to racial discrimination. "L.A. to Pay Black Firefighter \$1.5 Million Settlement," *Los Angeles Times* (Sept. 22, 2007).

The firefighter claimed his 20-year career was destroyed after he broke a code of silence and spoke out about the spaghetti prank.

Commentary and Checklist

Most pranks and jokes, including April Fools jokes, are harmless; however, some jokes are meant to bully, harass or embarrass co-workers. With the growing popularity of video-posting websites like YouTube, it is becoming increasingly common to perform pranks and then post them on the Internet, and thus a joke with a small audience initially can reach an audience of thousands.

Humor is important to any workplace. No one wants to work for a place that is without fun, but fun at someone else's expense is not funny.

It is important for managers and supervisors to pay close attention to joking in the workplace to determine whether the joke is crossing the line. No prank that involves potential injury to someone or compromising someone's health is warranted.

Prevention of risky pranks begins with a policy prohibiting unsafe workplace practices. This policy should:

- ✓ Define what is an unsafe workplace practice. Make certain that the definition is broad enough to include pranks, practical jokes, and horseplay.
- ✓ Also include other traditional forms of unsafe workplace practices, such as unsafe driving of employer vehicles, failure to follow OSHA guidelines, etc.
- ✓ You cannot name all the forms of unsafe workplace practices, so make certain that you include a "catch-all" phrase such as "unsafe practices."
- ✓ Provide a means for employees to report unsafe workplace practices without fear.
- ✓ Write clearly the punishment for violation of the policy; that punishment should include termination.
- ✓ Establish a method for employees to report retaliation for reporting unsafe workplace practices.

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