INTEGRITY
— ADVISORY GROUP —
INTEGRITY. INSIGHT. IMPACT.

FREE RESOURCE · HR GUIDE

Workplace Red Flags Guide

Warning signs every leader should recognize, what to do when you see them, and when to bring in an independent investigator.

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Most serious workplace problems send signals long before they become formal complaints, claims or headlines. This guide describes the warning signs leaders and HR professionals should watch for, what to do when you see them, and when an independent investigator is the right call.

INSIDE

- Red flags in culture, conduct, turnover and manager behavior
- Harassment and retaliation indicators
- Complaint-handling and documentation gaps
- A practical response plan and when to bring in an investigator

WHO IT IS FOR

Business owners, executive directors, HR professionals, pastors and ministry leaders, board members and managers in Illinois, California and beyond.

SECTION 1

Culture & Conduct Red Flags

Culture problems are rarely visible in a single event. Look for patterns over weeks or months.

Warning sign	Why it matters
Employees stop speaking up in meetings or say “it’s not worth it”	Silence often means people do not trust that concerns will be heard or handled fairly.
Jokes, nicknames or comments that target a group or individual are tolerated	Normalized disrespect can escalate into harassment and signals what leaders will accept.
Rules are applied differently depending on who is involved	Inconsistent treatment is a common basis for discrimination and retaliation claims.
Gossip, cliques or “in” and “out” groups shape assignments and opportunities	Favoritism erodes trust and can mask unfair or unlawful decisions.
High performers are excused from expectations others must meet	Protecting a “star” is a frequent root cause of unaddressed misconduct.
Pressure to hit targets “no matter what”	Unrealistic pressure can push people toward shortcuts, policy violations or dishonest reporting.

SECTION 2

Harassment & Retaliation Indicators

These signs do not prove harassment or retaliation occurred. They indicate that a closer, careful look is warranted.

- An employee suddenly requests a transfer, schedule change or different supervisor without a clear reason.
- Someone avoids a particular person, area or meeting, or appears visibly uncomfortable around them.
- Repeated private meetings, after-hours messages or social media contact from a supervisor to a subordinate.
- A previously well-rated employee receives negative reviews, reduced hours or less desirable assignments shortly after raising a concern, taking protected leave or participating in an investigation.
- Co-workers begin excluding or criticizing a person who made a complaint.
- Rumors about a relationship between a supervisor and someone in their reporting line.
- Complaints described as “personality conflicts” that involve comments about sex, race, age, religion, disability or another protected characteristic.

> **Retaliation is often the bigger risk**
>
> Even when an underlying complaint is not substantiated, adverse treatment of the person who raised it can create separate legal exposure. Any action affecting a complainant or witness after a complaint should be reviewed carefully and documented with legitimate, consistent reasons.

SECTION 3

Turnover & Engagement Signals

Warning sign	Why it matters
Turnover concentrated in one department or under one manager	Points to a local leadership or conduct issue rather than market conditions.
Exit interviews that are vague, skipped or never reviewed	Departing employees are often the most candid source of information.
Spikes in sick leave, absences or leave requests in one team	Can reflect stress, conflict or avoidance of a hostile environment.
Good employees leave soon after a new supervisor arrives	A pattern worth examining before it becomes a claim.
New hires leave within the first 90 days	May signal onboarding gaps, misrepresented roles or an unwelcoming culture.

SECTION 4

Complaint Handling & Documentation Gaps

Complaint handling

- No clear, written process for raising concerns, or only one reporting channel that runs through the person who may be involved.
- Complaints are handled informally by the manager involved, with no HR or leadership awareness.
- Long delays between a complaint and any response.
- Complainants are not told the process is underway or that it has concluded.
- Investigations are conducted by someone with a conflict of interest or no training.

Documentation

- Performance problems are discussed but never written down, then cited later to justify discipline.
- Personnel files are incomplete, inconsistent or kept in several places.
- Notes from complaints or interviews are missing, undated or written long after the fact.

- Decisions about discipline or termination lack a documented, job-related reason.
- Policies and handbook acknowledgments are outdated or unsigned.

SECTION 5

Manager Behavior Warning Signs

- Yelling, belittling, public criticism or threats, even if described as “just a direct style.”
- Discouraging employees from going to HR or leadership (“keep it in the team”).
- Controlling all information and relationships with upper management.
- Asking employees to work off the clock, skip breaks or adjust time records.
- Making employment decisions shortly after an employee raises a concern.
- Resistance to training, oversight or policy changes.

RESPONSE PLAN

What to Do When You See Red Flags

1. **Take it seriously.** Acknowledge the concern and thank the person who raised it. Avoid minimizing or promising a specific outcome.
2. **Protect against retaliation.** Remind managers that adverse action against anyone who raises a concern or participates in a review is prohibited.
3. **Preserve information.** Keep relevant emails, messages, schedules, time records and files. Suspend routine deletion if needed.
4. **Decide on interim measures.** Consider schedule changes, reporting-line adjustments or administrative leave where appropriate, without penalizing the complainant.
5. **Choose the right investigator.** Match the reviewer to the seriousness of the concern and the people involved.
6. **Document every step** in a neutral, factual way, and keep information on a need-to-know basis.
7. **Close the loop.** Tell the people involved that the matter has been addressed, take appropriate action and monitor for retaliation afterward.

MAKING THE CALL

When to Bring in an Independent Investigator

An internal review may be appropriate for simple, low-risk matters. Consider an independent investigator when any of the following apply:

Senior people are involved

The allegation involves an owner, executive, pastor, board member or someone HR reports to.

The stakes are high

Allegations of harassment, discrimination, retaliation, violence, theft or fraud, or a likely legal claim.

Objectivity is in question

Internal staff have relationships with the people involved or may be seen as taking sides.

Capacity or expertise is limited

No one internally has the time, training or experience to conduct a thorough, well-documented investigation.

There are multiple complaints

Several people or a pattern of conduct over time.

Financial issues overlap

Conduct concerns are mixed with questions about money, expenses or records.

Coordinate with counsel

When litigation is possible or underway, talk with your attorney about who should engage the investigator and how the work will be documented and shared.

Quick check: are you ready to respond?

#	Readiness item	Yes	No
1	We have a written complaint procedure with more than one reporting channel.	☐	☐
2	Managers know to escalate concerns to HR or leadership rather than handle them alone.	☐	☐
3	We have a written anti-retaliation policy that is communicated and enforced.	☐	☐
4	We know who would investigate a complaint against a senior leader.	☐	☐
5	We have a process to preserve records when a concern is raised.	☐	☐
6	Investigation files are stored securely, separate from personnel files.	☐	☐

NEXT STEPS

How IAG Can Help

IAG provides impartial, well-documented HR investigations and practical HR advisory support, and can help repair working relationships after an investigation through mediation and targeted training.

Forensic Accounting & Investigations

Independent fact-finding into suspected fraud, misconduct and unexplained losses, with clear, documented analysis and litigation support.

HR Investigations & HR Advisory

Impartial workplace investigations, HR advisory and HR retainer support, policy & handbook review, and HR compliance audits.

Mediation, Arbitration & Conflict Resolution

Neutral, confidential processes for workplace, board, ministry and business partner disputes, including post-investigation repair.

Internal Controls, Risk & Compliance

Internal control reviews, fraud risk assessments, and compliance & policy reviews that turn findings into working controls.

Training & Leadership Development

Workshops, keynotes, executive coaching and compliance training that build ethical, capable leaders and teams.

Serving Illinois & California

Engagements are delivered through secure virtual meetings. Other states by arrangement.

Schedule a confidential consultation at integrityadvisorygroup.org

Start with a confidential conversation about your situation. We will listen, clarify what you need and explain options before any work begins.

Email: jeremy@integrityadvisorygroup.org **Meetings:** Virtual **Service area:** Illinois & California (other states by arrangement)

Integrity Advisory Group opens for client engagements in January 2028.

Disclaimer. This resource provides general educational information only. It is not legal, accounting, tax or other professional advice, and it does not create a client relationship. Laws and requirements vary by state, industry and organization and change over time; consult qualified legal counsel or other advisors about your specific situation.