

# San Fernando Valley Business Journal

## Overprotective Parents Taking Employers to Task

By Shelly Garcia - 4/30/2007

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A few years ago, labor and employment law attorney Richard Rosenberg got a call from one of his clients, an HR administrator, who complained that she was getting calls from the parents of one of the firm's younger employees objecting to the performance review he received.

Rosenberg, a founding partner with Ballard, Rosenberg, Golper & Savitt LLP in Universal City, is not the only employment attorney to get such calls. There are reports of parents demanding to meet with employers. A few simply marched right into the office uninvited in a random series of incidents that began, not coincidentally, around the time that Millennials began to enter the workforce early in the 2000s.

Welcome to the brave new world of employee relations where the relationship between worker and employer has been turned inside out by a generation of parents so hands-on that they can't keep their noses out, even after their kids are grown and holding down jobs.

As Millennials, those born roughly between 1978 and 2000, enter the workforce, they are bringing with them the same parental ties and oversight that characterized their school years. And just as these parents inserted themselves into their kids' education and after-school activities, they are now seeking to become intimately involved in their kids' work life as well.

These so-called "helicopter parents", a term perhaps first coined in Jim Fay's book, "Helicopters, Drill Sergeants & Consultants: Parenting Styles and the Messages They Send," in 1994, may not yet be regular visitors to the workplace. But their influence is being felt by nearly every employer today.

"What employers are finding is, yes, there are very aggressive parents still getting involved on an employer level," said Amy Hirsh Robinson, a principal with Interchange Group, a Los Angeles consultancy that specializes in helping companies recruit and manage the intergenerational workforce. "But even if you take the parents away, what employers are finding is these workers don't have the same stamina to accept critical performance feedback and learn and grow from it because they have not received it before."

Typically baby boomers, these hovering moms and dads are accustomed to micro-managing their child's life. When the kids were in school, they scheduled every waking hour with extracurricular activities from soccer to music lessons. In their zeal to see their children excel, they rewrote the rules of competition and achievement, demanding that teachers and coaches dole out praise, top grades and trophies just for showing up.

As a result, social scientists say, they raised kids who, on the one hand, don't know how to make their way independently, and on the other, have never looked failure in the eye.

Now, those same kids are entering the workforce, lacking some basic skills as well as the ability to accept criticism, and their first performance review is a proverbial kick in the pants.

"They get to the workplace and these kids have been living in a bubble where reality hasn't been allowed to smack them in the face," Rosenberg said. "They never had anyone telling

them their performance wasn't good. Now they're sitting with an older manager who is expecting pay for performance and the kid has never experienced that."

Those who have become involved in the performance problems emerging from the resulting clash in expectations point out that the problems are twofold.

First, the younger generation entering the workforce for the first time doesn't have all the skills needed to get the job done. They typically lack communication skills, the savvy to deal with different management levels and the ability to manage their time and resources. But the bigger problem comes when the employer tries to formalize any sort of plan to help these workers overcome their deficiencies.

With a life experience that has included nothing but positive feedback, these workers are devastated when they are told they need to improve.

That is what happened at one company when a young woman in her mid-twenties was not catching on to her new sales job as quickly as her employer had hoped.

"The owner of this company was in his office having a meeting and this gentleman literally barged in and stood in front of his desk and said, 'Do you know who I am? I'm the father of so and so, and she's a race horse, and you're treating her like a stable horse'," said Warner Center employment law attorney Cindy Elkins, recalling one of the first times she heard a tale of these helicopter parents. "The employer told him, 'Your daughter hasn't complained to me, why are you here?' And the father said, 'She comes home and cries to me every night.'"

The simple answer, from a legal perspective, is to dismiss the disgruntled parent, who is, after all, is an outsider with no relationship to the employer.

But it isn't always that easy, attorneys and consultants say.

"If a parent calls HR and asks what is going on, HR legally cannot give them any information because (the children) are adults," said Robinson. "But the parent and child are so close and then you have the problem where the employee goes back to the employer and says, hey, I heard you were rude to my parents."

Disaffected employees, still heavily under the influence of overly-protective parents, can also be more likely to file lawsuits against employers. And when it comes to claims such as a hostile work environment, the courts can be fickle.

"What the court has said is, for the behavior to cross the line, the complaining person has to prove it is either severe or pervasive," said Rosenberg. "You never know where the line will be drawn."

The challenge is to engage these younger workers in a plan to develop the skills they lack in a way that encourages their buy-in.

But that, experts warn, is also likely to take its toll on middle managers, who are the ones typically charged with their training.

"What it means for the employer is the burden of the director supervisor is so much greater now, they literally have to take on more of a parenting role," Robinson said. "Managers already have more work than they can handle and now there's a lot more time and effort involved. So I would say the burden to manage is the biggest issue for employers."

