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HUMAN RESOURCES

Winning with Different (AKA Difficult) Employees

How to enforce better behavior

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Difficult people do, in fact, exist. They show up in all organizations, as no workplace is immune. The perfect workplace would be full of intrinsically motivated high performers who were always cheerful, were enthusiastic about change, never whined, were pleasant to coworkers, and were always satisfied and grateful for their pay.

Wouldn't it be nice if teams could always work effectively across departments, and conflicts between co-workers were nonexistent? The hard truth is that our workplaces are made up of real people. We also want interesting workplaces, and it's the uniqueness of our employees, including their quirks, that make it so.

Any employee can have a bad day or days. These real people have headaches, aging parents, money troubles, unfulfilled dreams – any number of distractions that plague them during the workday, and that can create a challenging day for the rest of us. But those employees aren't the subject of this article.

This is about that one employee – the one whose behavior is so pronounced it causes repeated workplace problems. These problems cause frustration that can result in lost productivity, employee turnover, customer complaints and low morale.

Fixing it can be tough. It requires commitment and effective management to convert these generally well-meaning but, frequently, misguided individuals.

My experience is that there are six distinct difficult employees who most often surface in the workplace.

The **negative** employee is suspicious of everything (and everyone). This is a glass-primarily empty kind of person. Nothing is ever good enough and if, by chance, something good does happen to them, they assume there's a catch.

No one works as hard, as long or cares as much as the **martyr** employee. They like to induce guilt in others. The martyr employee can often be heard to remind a listener of the exact number of hours he or she worked on a project. This sentence will often end with, "But I don't mind."

The **whiner** suffers from chronic malcontent. And they're consistent – they're generally whiners all the time, not just at work. The A.C. is too cold. The office is never clean enough. Ironically, they are frequently heard to say, "Nothing bothers me."

Those meek, silent, **passive-aggressive** types avoid conflict. That means they rarely contribute to a solution. They're quick



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to share faults and are almost always the best office gossips. They see things as always having been better in the past. Just like their close cousin, the whiner, change is hard for them. They struggle to see how anything different can be good. The passive-aggressive types also rely on the whiners. That's where they get the good gossip, because whiners are always ready to share negative news. This is a difficult personality type to change. The best approach is to keep them very close.

The **assertive** employee provides facts and information in a calm and logical manner. Although that sounds good, they're also arrogant and egotistical, and they really like to get their way. Here's the silver lining: They're the easiest "difficult" type to fix. They want to please others. They usually try to see both sides of the story, even if they believe their side is right.

We've all met or been victim to the office **bully**. They're demanding, loud and argumentative. They can be unnerving to deal with. They commonly use their gender, size or rank to push around others. They frequently promote their personal opinions without considering the feelings of others. They have learned that their aggressive behavior intimidates others into submission. They expect that these tactics will win. They frequently do.

Those are the six primary types of difficult employees. Now let's look at some of the manipulative behaviors they can exhibit: insubordination, intimidation, behind-the-back criticism, incompetence, poor job performance, personal attacks, disrespect, deflection of responsibility, rebellion, insistence on having the last word, dishonesty, jealousy, immaturity – the list goes on. None of these are good behaviors for a high-performing workplace.

To correct the behaviors and set these difficult employees on the right path, we first must understand that they behave the way they do because it has worked for them. They may have used these tactics for years to accomplish their personal objectives. The only way to correct the behavior is to take action. It's important to note at this point that these difficult employees no doubt add value to the organization. If they were just difficult and not contributing, they would not have survived up to this point. So, we want to keep them, but we can't ignore the bad behavior. Ignoring it perpetuates it.

The direct approach is best. You must share how their behavior affects you, others, the organization. It's important to do this

Steps to Winning

- » Share the impact of the behavior in a non-confrontational way.
- » Provide positive feedback, too.
- » State your expectations.
- » Provide examples of acceptable responses to workplace problems.
- » Gain commitment to change.
- » State the consequences of continued bad behavior.
- » Expect to have to readdress the behavior.
- » Enforce consequences.

in a non-confrontational manner. Just state it as a fact. Many of these difficult employees are unaware that their behavior harms anyone. The whiner, for example, doesn't believe he has visibility in the workplace, so how could his actions possibly affect anyone? You'll want to share something positive about the person, too. Highlight whatever it is they are contributing.

If you're the supervisor of the difficult employee, you should state your expectations for appropriate behavior and the consequences that will occur if there isn't change. Providing examples of an alternative reaction method is especially helpful to correct the bully and the passive-aggressive employee. Gain the employee's commitment to change. Then, expect change, but don't get disappointed and give up if it doesn't occur right away.

Remember, they have been this way for a long time. They may need reminders of your expectations. But don't let them get away with it, either. Follow through with the consequences. If you're not willing to enforce the consequences, you've made a decision to allow the bad behavior to continue.

Whether you're the supervisor or a co-worker, when you're having the conversation with a difficult employee, don't become emotionally involved. Some of these difficult employees really enjoy getting folks all spun up. Don't become the victim. Don't allow yourself to get sucked into a debate, either. You probably won't win in a battle of wills, so don't let the battle begin. State your point and move on.

Having open and frank conversations about workplace problems that have the potential to turn volatile is the most important step in stopping the manipulative behaviors exhibited by difficult people. Say something the first time a behavior makes you feel uncomfortable. If you ignore it, the message you're sending is that it's okay.



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