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When Managing Gets Tough

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Abstract (Summary)

Managers must measure the value of an individual employee's performance not only in terms of technical competence, but also in ability to support the work of others, advance departmental and corporate goals, and boost morale. According to Kaye A. Craft, president of the management and organization development firm K. Craft Associates, managers often push good employees into negative behavior by not making full use of their talents. When coaching difficult employees, managers should let the employees know that they want to help improve their behavior not set them up for dismissal. Banker Carl Fields, who coaches in this manner, believes that, if you change the behavior first, the attitude will follow. In union environments, a manager must first confer with the employee relations coordinator before any counseling session takes place so that the employee will not take advantage of an appeals process. Managers must deal immediately with any infraction of company rules. For relatively minor offenses, managers can inform employees that they are aware of the infraction and that they will continue to be watchful of the situation.

Full Text (2748 words)

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As a no-nonsense school administrator delicately put it, "When dealing with difficult employees, you warn 'em. You write them up. And if they don't change, you fire their butts." But if the source of your daily headache is also your best technical expert or creative genius, you may decide to look the other way when he or she strolls in late everyday, misses an important deadline or blows his or her top at a co-worker.

You'd almost have to do a cost-benefit analysis, measuring the havoc a hotshot might create among co-workers against the overall value of her work, to justify giving this person preferential treatment.

Unfortunately, you run a risk whenever you fail to coach, counsel or discipline a disruptive employee properly. The worst case is that the rest of your troops, if upset enough, may revolt.

In this era of collaborative effort, it's smart to measure the value of individual performance not only in terms of technical competence, but also in ability to support the work of others, advance departmental and corporate goals and boost morale.

So, before you look the other way, take a closer look at that employee. If his behavior causes him to fall short in any of those areas, you have some counseling to do.

THE DIFFICULT EMPLOYEE

The truly difficult employee marches to an offbeat or discordant drummer, manifesting disruptive or self-destructive behavior for reasons sometimes only a therapist can understand. He may have trouble controlling emotions, react poorly to authority or criticism, or behave immaturely around co-workers or clients.

Talk to a hundred managers, and you'll get a hundred different descriptions. Deborah A. Horsley, personnel assistant at Greystone Psychiatric Hospital in Greystone Park, N.J., feels it's a person who brings some sort of "dysfunctional behavior--rooted in personality disorders, mental imbalances, familial relationships, or addictions" to the workplace. To Carl Fields Jr., a vice president at Chase Manhattan Bank, a difficult employee is a person "who's too set in his ways or narrow-minded to see the big picture or change his approach to the job."

One of the most common reasons managers give for dismissal is interpersonal incompetence or failure to get along with others, according to Paula Michal-Johnson, author of *Saying Good-bye: A Manager's Guide to Employee Dismissal* (Scott, Foresman & Co., 1985). The common thread, it seems, is that the difficult person deliberately or inadvertently places a stumbling block on the path to success--theirs, yours, the team's or the company's.

Sometimes you have the problem, not the employee. Harvey Coleman, president of Coleman Management Consultants in Atlanta, advises managers who get hot under the collar at certain behaviors to examine their own beliefs, preferences or biases. "Do Wanda's braids really hurt business, or do you have a personal hang-up about ethnic hairstyles? Is Pete really too aggressive at meetings--or do you secretly dislike the guy no matter what he does?" he asks.

The tip-off that your objection might be more emotionally based than business-related is in how difficult it is for you to articulate the problem. "If, in describing the behavior, you find yourself coming up with accusatory or subjective labels instead of sound business reasons, then there may not be a real need for counseling," says Coleman.

Kaye A. Craft, president of K. Craft Associates, a management and organization development firm in East Orange, N.J., says managers often push good employees into negative behavior by not making full use of their talents. An employee empowered by one person to manage his own projects, challenge authority and make his own decisions, may become a difficult employee under a more controlling manager.

"Instead of trying to whip this employee into line, make better use of him," Craft advises. "Expand his assignments and responsibilities. Put him in charge of a task force, or loan him to other departments as a consultant for a couple of weeks."

If he's a genius who doesn't really work well with others, some experts recommend letting him report directly to you on special projects that don't require a lot of interaction with others, all the while coaching him into more socially effective behavior.

THE HANDS-ON MANAGER

"When coaching, you have to get in the trenches with the employee, let him know how you'll personally help to improve the behavior," says Coleman. "For example, tell Larry you'll pull your ear whenever you hear him use that particular tone of voice that always upsets his co-workers. The message Larry gets is that you really do want him to succeed; you're not just setting him up for dismissal."

Banker Carl Fields, who coaches in this manner, believes if you change the behavior first, the attitude will follow. "If it doesn't," he asserts, "at least the work is getting done."

He recalls the case of a platform representative who had done his job well for 10 years, helping customers sign up for the banking services they requested. "He ran into trouble when we changed our focus to cross-selling, which required the reps to ask the customer proactive questions to determine if additional services might be needed," says Fields. "This guy flatly refused to ask questions he felt were overly personal, such as Do you own your own home, have you ever bounced a check, or have you ever needed cash on the weekend."

While the other reps quickly caught on, this rep made no progress at all. Fields not only counseled the employee, but sat with him during customer interviews and took notes. "By giving him specific examples of how certain questions would have helped him better serve the customer, say by offering a money card with the new checking account, or a cash reserve account, and by helping him phrase the questions properly, I was able to build his confidence in the process. Soon, he was asking the right questions and moving his sales numbers up. He still felt he was intruding, but he did it."

Deb Horsley of Greystone Hospital who has actively coached several employees during her 20 years as a manager in publicly funded and state-run institutions, cautions that, "In the civil service environment, there are no difficult employees, only difficult situations. The disciplinary process is far more complex than what you'll find in corporate America. Here, the focus falls more on the managers and whether they're handling the employee or the situation correctly."

In union environments, the disruptive employee who takes advantage of an appeals process often wins because the manager documented actions incorrectly or failed to follow procedures. "A simple talking-to could result in a harassment suit," says Horsley. "Therefore, before any counseling session takes place, the manager must first confer with the employee relations coordinator, an autonomous representative who acts as a liaison between the institution and the union. When done properly, the counseling process can be a positive experience for both the employee and the supervisor. Otherwise, it's the supervisor who learns a hard lesson."

In the corporate arena, the secondline manager, who normally maintains a hands-off but interested position sometimes has to coach her own manager through the problem or initiate a skip-level meeting with the employee.

Vice president Fields recalls the instance of a promising black teller whose performance began to slip under his new manager, a white woman. Fields took the young man to lunch and gently probed into the cause of his problem. "He cited a night job and girlfriend problems, reasons he hadn't shared with his manager because she was too busy. After more probing, he admitted he just didn't think a white woman could relate to his problems."

Fields convinced the young man to go back and let his manager do her job. Within weeks, the employee and his manager were good buddies--and his star was back in ascendancy.

LOTS OF MINOR INFRACTIONS

Sometimes an otherwise good employee will flaunt company rules. She may turn assignments in late (often pressing vendors or other employees into expensive overtime), rack up pages of unpaid personal telephone calls every month, cart packages of folders and diskettes home without permission to "work at night," or regularly take "stress days" off and record them as sick days.

"No matter how small the infraction, it's in your best interest to deal with it the minute you notice it," says Coleman, "Failure to uphold a policy consistently can lead to its eventual erosion. If you let one employee cheat on his timecard, then you must give everyone the same option."

For relatively minor rule-benders, drop by the employee's office and casually mention that you've been observing the behavior and it doesn't look good. Let her know you're paying attention and are highly likely to catch any subsequent violations. Remember, if the employee chooses to make a game of it, you hold the winning card--dismissal.

One of the most common offenses is also the most troublesome for many managers: reporting to work late on a regular basis. Most management experts recommend taking a tough stance with offenders, no matter how good they are or how many hours they put in. Coleman suggests telling the person his behavior is connected to how others react and think. "Ask the person if his job is worth making a change in his lifestyle. If not, tell him you'll do what you can to help by giving him a day off to look for more suitable employment elsewhere," he says.

"Give him a fair chance to succeed. When he backslides, as he inevitably will, start again. People don't change overnight. It takes time and patience."

Also, he warns, don't assume that every late employee is a rulebreaker. "I recall a woman who left home every morning at 6:30, took a bus to the baby sitter, then two buses to work. She was 15 minutes late everyday and about to be fired. She hadn't told her manager about not having a car, ironically, for fear of losing her job." For her, says Coleman, "the answer was flextime. Had her manager probed a little more, he might have been able to work things out with her sooner."

SERIOUS FOUL PLAY

"Often the employee who engages in criminal violations, such as theft, espionage and improper use of company resources will be very bright, perhaps a star performer," says consultant Kaye Craft, "which can make it an even more difficult situation to deal with. Of course, you have no choice but to follow your company's rules for appropriate disciplinary action."

A former corporate manager-turned-business-owner once inherited an employee who was both highly thought of by his previous manager and well-connected within his function. The manager also inherited a monthly flow of memos from accounting about Mr. Wonderful's late payments on his corporate credit card. Assuming he was merely disorganized or lazy about converting the company's reimbursement checks into credit card payments, the manager went easy on him in the counseling session.

When, despite repeated reminders, the behavior expanded to include sloppy expense accounting, the manager reluctantly began to question the employee's ethics. He began doublechecking all his numbers, to see if the results were arrived at honestly.

Within weeks of the scrutiny, the employee resigned--attempting to leave while owing the company thousands of dollars in unpaid credit card bills. The manager admits that the employee's superstar status protected him longer than it should have.

DO WE HAVE TO PLAY WITH HER?

People, who for reasons of personality or appearance, are on everyone's "least-liked" list, carry titles like Willie the Whiner, Tight-lips Houlihan and Attila the Honey. Also included on this list of socially ineffective types are people who "look funny, talk funny, think funny or smell funny," according to Fred Fiedler, a leadership expert who developed a rating scale for the "Least-Preferred Co-worker." This person is unable to perform routine functions that require interaction with others. Despite his technical or creative skills, he can't get group consensus (no one wants to agree, work or be seen with him), is ineffective or embarrassing at meetings, makes a poor company ambassador, never offers an opinion--in public or otherwise--and is a general turnoff to others.

It's your duty to point out the problem. This is tough, but unless; it's due to medical or other reasons beyond the employee's control, he will eventually appreciate your courage and concern and make an effort to improve. During the

session, talk about your observations, not what others have said. There's no point in dragging co-workers into it and further alienating the employee. Keep it strictly between the two of you.

A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

Edward Brewington, who, as director of management and leadership development for IBM Corp. is responsible for the training of 20,000 employees a year, has focused a substantial portion of a new manager's first year of instruction on dealing with problem situations.

One of the toughest situations simulated during class is the employee who refuses to open up.

"Let's say Charlene never talks about anything, including work, with you or her co-workers," says Brewington. You might have a cup of coffee with her and, without infringing on her rights as an individual, begin probing to see if anything is bothering her. It could be that everyone knows what Charlene's problem is except you. Be observant. Talk to the one person Charlene does have a relationship with. Say, 'Gee, Why is Charlene always so quiet?' If you're lucky, the friend will respond with, well, let me tell you..."

"Once you have a better understanding of the problem," says Brewington "the next step is to describe for Charlene how it helps others for her to be more communicative."

Sometimes how the person communicates is the problem. In some environments, it's perfectly acceptable to use a well-placed swear or curse word to lend energy or urgency to your message. But some people are very uncomfortable with X-rated language. The same holds true for street slang and sexist language.

A communications manager at a mid-size firm recalls wincing when an executive in charge of the company's local United Way kickoff threw away the speech her staff had written for him and "winged it," liberally peppering his talk with folksy "goddamns." Later, half the audience complained to her about it. She had the painful duty of bringing it to his attention. He seemed contrite, telling her he was "sorry as hell" about it.

"If you personally find it offensive," says Coleman, "just say that you have a problem with the language and don't consider it professional."

I DON'T TAKE ORDERS FROM YOUR KIND

You feel the tension whenever the employee enters your office (never voluntarily). He's a good employee--shows up on time everyday, coaches others, keeps the work flowing--but he's also a racist and makes no bones about not liking you. "Every organization has racist, sexist or some other form of discriminatory behavior to deal with," says management consultant Craft. "If you have a racist or sexist employee, examine the ways the organization might be supporting the attitude and behavior--and then work to eliminate the negative reinforcement."

If your staff is always squabbling and name-calling, Craft advises calling a meeting and laying the problem squarely on the table. "Cite examples to show how the behavior hurts everyone's performance. Don't let them turn the finger of blame back on you. Make sure everyone understands his or her own responsibility for the behavior."

Meanwhile, if you feel you're a target, let the staff know that you're not easy prey. Tell them you'll be watching and listening and will deal appropriately with troublemakers.

"If you do this, though," warns Craft, "make sure you know whether the organization genuinely values you regardless of your race or sex. If the sensitivity isn't there from the top, you may end up fending off charges from all directions."

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS

As one manager put it, "The employee can be an ace, but if he fails in other key areas, then he's not that good. We have to manage on the overall basis of the department and all of its aspects."

Adds Coleman: "If one employee is considered the equivalent of your other '10' people, then you're in big trouble. What if the employee leaves anyway? You'd be better off developing the skills and talents of the rest of the team than coddling and protecting the disruptive star."

"As a manager, you have a right, the obligation to demand behavior that will lead to great results," concludes Brewington. "Failure to coach, counsel and discipline when necessary could lead to your manager counseling you for not doing your job."

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