

THE SUPERVISOR/HR NEWSLETTER



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EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

NOV
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Session Recording Links

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Relationship Excellence for Managers

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/recording/8528081955655269121>

How to Motivate Employees from Different Generations

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/recording/6833217767937705729>

How to Effectively Delegate Tasks & Responsibilities

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Difficult Employees

Basics

You know them. You work with them. And inside, you get frustrated with them. They are...the difficult people.

At one time or another, most people have dealt with coworkers with annoying behavior. They are bullies, fence-sitters, know-it-alls, no people (and yes people), whiners, busybodies, energy-sappers, time-suckers, complainers, and other members of this difficult tribe. Every manager has a pet peeve about difficult people, but not every manager can cope with them gracefully, and in a way that matches the needs and goals of the organization.

The hardest part of dealing with a difficult employee is controlling your own behavior. Three of the most common reactions to a frustrating employee are

- Reducing the employee to nothing by saying things like, “You’re useless”
- Telling others about your frustrations and enlisting them on your side
- Inventing negative motivations that make the employee look bad by saying things like, “He or she won’t do their job because he or she is lazy”

Though you may feel frustrated, it’s best to respond to a difficult employee in a calm and collected way. Why? Because it shows that you are:

- Professional under pressure
- Interested in solving the problem, not attacking the person
- Evenhanded in dealing with all employees—even the difficult ones

By responding calmly, you leave the door open to talking frankly with the difficult employee and solving the problem.

There are many strategies for dealing with different types of difficult employees, but in most cases, discussing the problem is a good starting point. Many managers have found that the following phrases can spark such a conversation:

- “Let’s not play the blame game. Tell me how you see the problem.” (This is useful with employees who blame others.)
- “I want to know your feelings about the situation and how you think we can get back on track.” (This is useful with employees who are quietly frustrated.)
- “I’m not asking for an apology. I want to understand where you’re coming from.” (This is useful with employees who explain by apologizing.)
- “In your view, what can I do to help resolve the problem? What can you do?” (This is useful with employees who think that situations are hopeless or unmanageable.)

Key Tips

Key Tip 1

Time-outs can help. When tempers flare, adrenaline flows. Adrenaline increases heart and breathing rates, and launches the fight-or-flight response—or, in this case, the aggressive response. It takes several minutes for adrenaline levels to recede, so telling someone to go cool down for 20 minutes or so makes sense.

Key Tip 2

You can't change difficult employees. His or her behavior—whether it's whining, sniping, or taking up too much of your time—is deeply rooted, and may have been going on for years. Instead, focus on how his or her behavior is hurting job performance.

Key Tip 3

Firing isn't the answer—neither is encouraging a difficult employee to quit. Both are tempting responses to frustrating behavior, but both can be expensive options. Look for ways to use the annoying behavior productively. For example, if there's a perpetual pessimist on your staff, run new ideas by him or her to get a sense of objections that might be raised by others.

Key Tip 4

Keep the big picture in mind. When you're dealing with a difficult employee, your job is to solve a problem and advance the organization's goals—not to change the employee, lay blame, or make the employee feel badly.

Specifics

It's best to deal with frustrating people in the calmest, most collected way possible. But because difficult employees' personalities vary so much, you have to choose the appropriate strategy for each type. Here are a few of the personalities and suggestions on how to keep them from disrupting your organization:

“Dr. No”

Profile: Often a perfectionist, this person is a professional at raining on everyone's parade. Their pessimism and hopelessness makes everyone around them feel negative.

Slogan: “That will never work.”

Strategy: Have compassion for these employees' fear. Use them as a sounding board for new ideas and consider whether their objections have merit. Their reactions may be indicators of what other people might say later.

The Time Thief

Profile: This person takes much more time than he or she should: digressions, long explanations, and wordiness are frequent. He or she wants to keep you listening and talking.

Slogan: “Just one more thing...”

Strategy: This person might not really need your attention, but feels as though he or she does. Make it clear at the beginning of the conversation that you're happy to talk, but that your time is limited. Ask for the short version of the story.

The Sarcastic Sound-Biter

Profile: These people make sarcastic asides in public forums while others are talking. They are hecklers or verbal bullies.

Slogan: “Hey Frank, did that tie come with a free bowl of soup?”

Strategy: If a person like this interrupts your presentation, you can ignore or challenge him or her by asking a “searchlight” question that makes the heckler defend the relevance of his or her comments. If he or she says something nasty about your tie while you’re in the middle of a presentation, for example, you can say, “What does my tie have to do with this quarter’s sales?” It’s a bold maneuver, but with this comment you address the behavior and align yourself with the organization’s goals.

Caution: Don’t fight him or her with sarcasm, or you’ll risk being lumped into the same category—difficult.

The Gossip

Profile: The gossip listens for news about the company or his or her coworkers and then shares it carelessly. Often, these people use information as a form of currency to gain favor with some at the expense of someone else’s privacy.

Slogan: “Want to hear something juicy?”

Strategy: Take the gossip aside and let him or her know that you are aware of his or her bad habit. Then explain how his or her gossip is damaging the organization.

The Angry Tiger

Profile: When frustrated, the angry tiger lashes out at those around him or her. These type of people raise their voice frequently and use aggressive body language.

Slogan: “#\$%@;^%!”

Strategy: When an employee like this confronts you, take control of the situation. Try to get the employee’s attention (repeating his or her name might help). Let the employee know that you hear his or her frustration by using empathetic statements such as, “That sounds frustrating” or “I know that you’re working hard on this.” When the employee begins to calm down, ask him or her to take a break for a few minutes, and arrange a time to come back to talk about the problem. Then, at a later, calmer time, talk to the employee about how his or her presentation of the problem is hurting his or her performance. Counseling may help solve this problem, but don’t suggest this on your own. Get advice from your human resources director.

Caution: Focus on how anger is hurting the employee’s performance. Don’t make generalizations about any employee’s character or alleged mental problems. Your human resources department can offer the employee an anger management course or other services, but no one can force the employee to get help.

FAQs

After I finish dealing with frustrating employees, I'm the one who's frustrated. How can I keep them from stressing me out so much?

That's a tough question. Here are strategies that have proved effective for many managers:

Do

- Breathe slowly through your nose.
- Have phrases up your sleeve for dealing with each difficult personality.
- Listen to what the employee is saying; there may be a work-related basis for the grievance.
- Ask the employee to generate a solution to the problem (but be ready with one of your own).
- Make the employee feel that he or she has been heard.
- Lay down the law when necessary, and be clear about what is unacceptable behavior.
- Keep the big picture—the organization's success—in mind.

Don't

- Take the behavior personally.
- Accept all of the responsibility for creating a solution.
- Bad-mouth the employee.
- Think of the employee in negative terms.
- Invent motivations for the behavior.

Employees have been coming to me with complaints about Sam, who's infamous for blaming other people for problems with his projects. Many of his coworkers feel unfairly criticized—and they are. What do I do?

Although you have an opinion, don't take sides. Listen to the employees, but don't make any explanations for Sam's behavior. It's okay to say something like, "I don't know why he's doing that." Then take Sam aside privately, let him know that his behavior is a problem, and ask him why he feels that he's not getting enough support (or whatever his complaints center on). Get him to explain the problem rather than lay blame.

Source: Workplace Options. (Reviewed 2018). Difficult employees. Raleigh, NC: Author.

Ask Your EAP!

The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.

Q. If an employee approaches a supervisor about a personal problem, should he or she always be referred to the EAP no matter what the problem might be? For example, my employee complained that he hadn't seen a dentist in three years. I recommended mine.

A. If your employee asks for a recommendation for a dentist, there certainly isn't harm in sharing the name of the one you use. However, if the discussion includes reasons as to why this delay has occurred, a recommendation to talk to the EAP about those issues is appropriate. Every day, employees share personal problems with coworkers and supervisors at work. There is nothing unusual about it. However, some issues that at first appear benign are associated with severe problems that are suitable for bringing to the EAP. It is important for you as a supervisor to have a sense of curiosity about your employees and their well-being. The rationale is that your employees represent your most valuable resource. This curiosity does not mean involving yourself in employees' personal matters or diagnosing problems. But it does mean going a step further when an employee approaches you with something personal, and considering whether an EAP issue exists in the situation he or she presents. Curiosity means asking why. In your case, a delay in seeing a dentist could be associated with fear or financial hardship, among other reasons.

Q. What is the most difficult roadblock to supervisors using the EAP in managing troubled employees?

A. The most difficult roadblock supervisors face in using the EAP to manage troubled employees is making the switch from doing it all themselves, to using a systematic approach to assess, refer, treat, and follow up on a troubled employee. The old approach may include ignoring problems until they precipitate a crisis. Although an employee may sign a release that provides for limited feedback about EAP participation, a supervisor is, by design, removed entirely from involvement in the employee's problems. This shift can be difficult because the supervisor must give up the ability to control the helping process and its outcome. Turning these roles over to the EAP frees the supervisor from the burden of being an amateur diagnostician, motivational counselor, and caseworker. But this freedom is not always as welcome as it sounds. Some supervisors may feel competent in handling these roles; they may believe in their history of doing so and experience satisfaction and meaning by involving themselves in their employees' lives. Unfortunately, this approach carries significant risk for all parties concerned.

Q. Can you provide a checklist of points for meeting with an employee to confront them about performance, motivate them to correct it, and encourage them to use the EAP?

A. Talk with the EAP or recall the process of recommended steps for your organization, but the following should be helpful: 1) focus on job performance; 2) be specific; 3) ask the employee if he/she understands the situation clearly; 4) ask the employee to paraphrase what the supervisor has said; 5) ask the employee for a commitment to change; 6) set a specific time for follow-up and review; 7) explain that the employee must decide whether he/she should seek help for any personal issue that may be contributing to the performance issue; 8) explain clearly the EAP and how it works, and discuss confidentiality; 9) fully assure the worker that use of the EAP does not affect job security or promotional opportunities, and is not punitive in any way.

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