The Leader’s Guide to Managing Problem Employees

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Managing Problem Employees: A Six-Step Process

We’ve all witnessed the havoc and felt the pain created by problem co-workers. Ironically, the biggest mistake managers make when managing problem employees is avoiding the problem. They stay away from the employee and place added burdens on other employees whom they trust, which leads to a whole host of other bigger problems.

So don’t wait – act! Consider these 6 steps to relieving the pain:

1. **Talk to the employee.** They may not realize that their performance or behavior is unacceptable.
2. **Describe the issues objectively.** Use facts and examples to describe both what they are doing and why it isn’t acceptable, then guide them to where you want to see them perform.
3. **Focus on specific positive outcomes.** Paint a picture of what behavior you want them to start exhibiting (i.e. “I need you to start doing this because ...”).
4. **Set clear expectations.** Establishing expectations about behavior and performance within a reasonable timeline is critical to correct the issues. Depending on the person, job, and deliverables, you may want to give a week or two or even a few months.
5. **Lay out next steps.** What must they do, what will you do, when and how will you reconnect.
6. **Write down everything.** Once you start dealing with a weak employee, firing them may become the only option. Make sure you prepare for that possibility by keeping a record of all issues and interactions. It can save you considerable time and money later.

If you really understand the employee and their personality at a deeper level, you will improve your ability to communicate and coach them through their issues. However, if you’ve tried and don’t see the improvement or changes you want, don’t hesitate to “help your employee out of your company.” The longer you wait to take action, the greater the negative impact on your business.
3 Steps to Help Your Managers Prepare for Difficult Conversations

During times of budget challenges and uncertainty, supervisors might be experiencing an increase in the number of difficult conversations with their staff. These talks could include delivering bad news about an employee’s job, informing staff about work restructuring, or discussing other complicated and stressful work situations.

1. Preparing for the conversation
   - Before going into the conversation, ask yourself several key questions. Consult with Human Resources, peers, and other appropriate resources to be sure you’re comfortable with the answers.
   - Key questions include:
     - What is my purpose for having the conversation?
     - What do I hope to accomplish?
     - What is the ideal outcome? What are other possible outcomes?
     - What assumptions am I making about the other person’s reaction to the conversation?
     - What “hot buttons” exist – for me and for the other person?
     - How is my attitude toward the conversation contributing to the intended outcome?
   - Practice the conversation. You can mentally rehearse it in your mind or practice it aloud with your supervisor, Employee Assistance Program, or Human Resources.

2. Holding the conversation
   - A successful outcome will depend on two things: what you say and how you say it. How you approach the conversation and how you behave will greatly influence what you say and how it is perceived.
   - Acknowledge any emotional energy that might be fueled by the conversation. The emotional content is as important as the facts.
   - Keep aligned with the purpose of your conversation. Don’t be distracted by unrelated topics.
   - Suggestions for opening the conversation include:
     - “I’d like to talk to you about. . .”
     - “I want to better understand your point of view. Can we talk more about. . .?”
     - “I’d like to talk about ______. I think we may have different ideas on how to ______.”

3. Working toward a successful outcome
   - Approach the conversation with an attitude of inquiry and discovery. Set aside assumptions and try to learn as much as possible about the other person’s point of view. Let the employees complete what they have to say without interruption.
   - Acknowledge that you’ve heard what the other person is trying to say. The best way to do this is to repeat their argument or concerns back to them. You don’t have to agree.
Saying “It sounds like this issue is very important to you” is empathetic and clarifying but doesn’t imply that you agree with their concerns or course of action.

- Advocate for your position without diminishing theirs. State your position concisely and clarify points they may not have understood.
- End with problem-solving. Find mutual areas where you can agree on solutions and identify what steps need to be taken. If there is no common ground, return to inquiry.
10 Tips to Help Manage High Performers with Difficult Personalities

Managing high performers with difficult personalities is one of the greatest managerial challenges that leaders face. We see it all the time across every industry and function. Whether it is the rainmaker with the golden Rolodex, the genius software engineer, or the prickly neurosurgeon, sometimes we can't live with these people but we also can't live without them. So what can leaders do to bring out the best in these difficult people while minimizing the negative impact they have on their co-workers and the organizational climate?

Research conducted by Profiles International shows that today’s workplaces are overrun with “divas” and “jerks”. Our research undertook the task of understanding the best ways to manage these “difficult” workers.

The study, which had over 700 participants, uncovered some interesting findings, including:

- More than half surveyed claimed that 25% of high performers in their organization were difficult to work with
- Sales and Operations were identified as the departments with the highest numbers of difficult high performers
- 72% disagreed that it is ok for managers to give special treatment to difficult characters just because they are high performers
- A shocking 49% of managers could not identify what makes a high performers successful
- 68% of managers did not understand why “difficult” high performers behave the way they do
- 78% of managers did not know how to manage these employees effectively

However, while these issues do not go unnoticed, managers are reluctant to do anything about them, as the cost tends to exceed the benefits. Sixty-two percent of participants agreed with this statement.

The majority of managers surveyed claimed they do not use assessments to work with difficult employees. These tools can be very useful in identifying not only high performers, but also how well the person (including difficult employees) will fit the job.

For all managers dealing with these jerks, prima donnas and hot heads, here are 10 simple tips to managing difficult employees:

1. Have a one-on-one conversation with the employee in private.
2. Consult with other managers and your boss.
3. Provide the employee with outside training.
4. Make yourself available to the employee for additional training.
5. Be sure to outline clear guidelines of conduct for the employee.
6. Have a discussion about the issues at a meeting with the employees involved.
7. Schedule a formal employee review, even if one is not due.
8. Request the employee to submit reports about how he or she is seeking to change their behavior.
9. Put the employee on probation for an appropriate amount of time.
10. For more serious problems, terminate the employee immediately, explain cause and provide pay for any hours worked.

If the person’s behavior goes too far and they remain employed, it could seriously damage staff morale. Do not be too hesitant to let these people go just because they are high performers. This one person could badly affect the remaining “well-behaved” employees. These employees are the backbone of your company!
How Employee Assessments Can Help Nip Co-worker Conflict in the Bud

In a perfect world, work would always be enjoyable, and work environments would promote productivity and engagement. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case. People find themselves in sticky situations or conflict with coworkers. Some personalities and behaviors are oil and water, and they will never mix. Fortunately, the right employee assessments can nip co-worker conflict in the bud, and minimize drama and disruption.

**What if there was a way to solve or even proactively stop these conflicts?** Employee assessments offer quantitative insight into an employee's natural tendencies and personalities. This information can enable managers to build balanced and effective teams, or solve conflicts among existing members.

Personalities and behaviors are complex and occur for various reasons. Each individual employee brings their own past experiences and learned behaviors with them to the job each day. These experiences and personality differences can often lead to conflict between coworkers. Disagreements are a necessary evil that is required to make progress, but too much of it can inhibit productivity. Employee assessments reveal crucial information, about each employee, that is useful for solving differences.

Conflicts are easily resolved if the root of the problem can be identified. Managers or team members may spend too much time trying to discover what the cause of an issue may be, but an employee assessment can easily predict problem areas. The guessing game is not a professional's favorite, and playing it to eliminate conflicts does not resolve the problem in a timely fashion. Conflicts that are not addressed between employees can cause lasting friction among team members and will ultimately destroy a team's efficiency.

While assessments are successful in solving problems between existing employees, they are also helpful during the hiring process to choose the individuals who will best fit the job and the team. Assessments provide hiring managers with a powerful tool that reveals the true person beneath the sparkling résumé.

**When hiring a new employee, managers have a tendency to choose people who are similar to themselves.** This may seem like a good idea, but employee assessments will show that having a team composed of similar people can lead to disruptions and lower productivity. People with similar personalities will often have similar weaknesses.

If no balance exists and there is no diversity within a group, small issues or concepts may be overlooked because there is a skewed view. If an entire team is made up of people who are not detail-oriented, projects may need to be repeated several times in order to work out the problems that could have been caught had there been a detail-oriented team member.

On the other hand, it would not be wise to hire someone who has a personality that is not compatible with the other team members. It is difficult enough to introduce a new face into an
established team, but it doesn't have to be with the help of employee assessments. The same process is applicable when evaluating established teams. Assessing teams can lead to finding new ways to improve the work culture and the way all of the moving parts work together.

Assessments act as a refined tool that focuses on areas of behavior that impact an individual’s work life. Just as a mechanic would not work on a car without the proper tools, managers should not try to resolve conflict or hire an employee unprepared. Employee assessments can introduce a wealth of information that will educate professionals in a way that enables them to develop personally.

If knowledge is power, then assessments are powerful and can only bring positive change through understanding. Consider using employee assessments during times of conflict, for hiring, and as a tool for constructing effective and productive teams.
About Profiles International

Profiles International offers assessment solutions that enable organizations to select the right people and develop them to their full potential.

We work with clients across the employee life cycle to enhance the productivity and performance of individuals, teams, and organizations. Our solutions can help clients screen-out unsuitable candidates, match others with jobs that fit their inherent capabilities, understand strengths and limitations for successful on-boarding, and identify opportunities to enhance performance and maximize their long-term contribution to the organization.

We are committed to the highest degree of ethics, integrity, and client success. We do this through continued investment in scientific research and development, product innovation, and client services. Over the past 20 years, we have served more than 40,000 clients in over 120 countries and 30 languages.

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