Dealing with a difficult employee

One of the most challenging aspects of leadership is gracefully managing difficult people in the workplace.



These employees are those who, for any number of reasons, create roadblocks to smooth and productive collaboration. Some people are constantly late arriving to the office and meetings or turning in work past the deadline. Others insist on engaging in office gossip, spreading rumours or speaking unkindly about their coworkers or employer. Still others do not necessarily display any specifically harmful behaviour, but seem to be unhappy all of the time, never seeming to enjoy or take pride in their work – these can be the most difficult to deal with as there is little that you can pinpoint and address directly from a "performance" criteria. Regardless of the specific cause of the negativity with these people, it can be very stressful to keep your cool while managing their unprofessional behaviours. Below are some tips to help you smoothly navigate your interactions with difficult employees.

- **Realize it is not personal.** When someone exhibits difficult behaviours like tardiness, toxic gossiping or a consistently low mood, the likely explanation is that the problem lies within them, not with you or your management style. Remembering that this behaviour is not a product of your leadership but something unsettled in your employee's personal life can release a lot of stress and anxiety for you. This alone will not solve the problem, but it will certainly help you remain level-headed and better positioned to take positive action.
- **Speak with empathy and compassion.** Once you have assessed the situation and concluded that there might be something going on in your employee's life that is contributing to their undesirable behaviour, speak with them. It is best to speak with them immediately rather than let the problem fester and grow into something larger. Set up a meeting and approach your employee with an open mind. Tell them you have noticed their behaviour and that you are concerned. Offer if there is something you can do to better support them and their work. This also might be a place to suggest or refer them to counselling or other employee assistance services.
- **Set consistent boundaries.** Once you have addressed the issue compassionately and directly, it is time to be clear with your boundaries. This is where kind yet firm warnings can be very useful: tell the person that lateness, gossiping or whatever behaviour you identify as difficult is not acceptable and will not be tolerated. Just because you care about them and recognize that these behaviours are likely a sign of something challenging in their personal life does not mean you will allow the behaviours to continue to impact the workplace. Once you have set boundaries, stick to them, and ensure that you maintain the same standards for everyone who reports to you.
- **Know when it is time to move on.** If the challenging behaviour you are addressing continues beyond the clear boundaries you have set, it might be time to consider other more formal disciplinary options. Consultation with HR professionals regarding performance based discipline is the next step. If you have tried all of the above and nothing is changing, it may be necessary to terminate their employment in order to restore a peaceful, productive work environment for yourself and your other employees. This also may be the best thing for the employee in the long run: if they are truly unhappy in their job, you can only hope that moving on might allow them to find fulfillment elsewhere.

Dealing with difficult people can cause a lot of stress, and is often one of the things you may spend energy worrying about outside of the office. Remember that clarity, kindness and directness can save you emotional energy and confusion in the long run. Try to deal with difficult employees as you would any other leadership

challenge; be prepared with a plan and tools. Implementing some of the above strategies for navigating this tricky terrain can allow you to let go of a great deal of this professional and personal strain and allow you to spend that extra energy on other positive outcomes.

If you are looking for additional ideas or guidance for your team, take advantage of a Manager Consultation through your EFAP by calling 1.866.833.7690 or browse the workshops and seminars available to your organization through our Workplace Learning Solutions.