Dealing with difficult behaviours



The key to success for any organizational leader is having a team with the right combination of skills, talents and personalities. When the mix is right, new ideas flow, engagement and productivity are high and people work cooperatively. While the occasional conflict will arise due to miscommunication, unclear job responsibilities or differing working styles, the biggest threat to team morale and performance is having individuals with difficult behaviours. Left unresolved, one person can upset, demoralize, frustrate and obstruct the entire team.

Difficult workplace behaviours

While everyone is unique, there are certain negative behaviours that can have a detrimental impact on your entire team. Some of the most prevalent disruptive behaviours are displayed by certain personality types including:

- **The narcissist.** This individual has a need for admiration, carries a sense of entitlement, exhibits arrogance and grandiose behaviour and has a general lack of empathy for others. In other words, it's all about them. They usually have an inflated opinion of themselves and their work and attempt to gain favour with no care of how their actions affect others. Narcissists are also extremely sensitive to criticism of any kind and liable to react badly.
- **The bully.** While there is legislation against overt workplace harassment and most organizations have definitive guidelines regarding bullying, it continues – just more insidiously. Workplace bullies denigrate, criticize, manipulate, intimidate or exclude. Like the narcissist, they push others down so they can rise to the top and are usually disliked, mistrusted and avoided by coworkers.
- **The passive-aggressive.** This employee says one thing and does another. They can be hard to spot because they appear to be cooperative, calm and pleasant. However, underneath they are angry and hostile and may deliberatively undermine or sabotage co-workers or projects.
- **The gossiper.** This individual may be a highly-effective member but seems to get gratification by talking behind people's backs and spreading rumours (true or untrue). They create insecurity, uncertainty and division in the team. However, they may feel gossiping is just a way to connect with others.
- **The victim.** This is an individual who constantly complains about their situation or problems. For example, they have more work than anyone else or are never treated fairly. They will play the victim when things go wrong by claiming they were left out or people didn't cooperate with them.
- **The finger pointer.** This is the person who is never to blame for any problem. They divert responsibility away from themselves and onto others when things go wrong and rarely acknowledge or apologize for their own mistakes, bad decisions, or poor performance. Also they can stretch the truth in order to convince others that their version of events is accurate.
- **The mule.** This employee rigidly follows procedures and keeps everyone on track. Mules can be beneficial to your team, however, they also stubbornly resist any change, making the introduction of new processes, personnel or products harder for everyone.
- **The volcano.** No one ever knows what to expect from this highly emotional individual who explodes when their needs are not being met. They tend to be attention seekers, dramatic and moody. When they're happy they can be entertaining and energetic but when they're not, everyone knows.

Managing difficult behaviours

It's important to deal with difficult behaviours as soon as possible before they begin undermining the efforts of the entire team and your effectiveness as a manager.

Different behaviours require different approaches but there are some actions you can take that can help with all personalities. They include:

- **Set the standard.** As a manager, you want to be perceived as fair and reasonable. Be an example of the behaviours you expect from your team. Set standards of behaviour and hold people to them.
- **Focus on productivity**. No matter how frustrated or angry you may feel about an employee's behaviour towards you or members of the team, remain calm and focus on the impact the employee's behaviour is having on performance. Be positive and use "I" language. For example, "I understand how hard you work." Agree on specific expectations for future performance and behaviour.
- **Listen**. In some cases, personal issues, workplace stress or health concerns may be at the root of problem behaviours. Just being heard and understood can change an employee's attitude. You can also show your support by suggesting the employee contact the company's Employee and Family Assistance Program for help and information.
- **Document.** Sometimes a quiet conversation between you and the employee can turn things around. However, be sure to write down the key points of the conversation, including agreed on changes. If problems persist or escalate, more formal or disciplinary actions may be required and you will need a paper trail.
- **Understand your organization's policy on workplace behaviour.** You need to understand your responsibilities, expectations for your employees and when to involve your HR department. You also need to know what resources are available to both you and your team.

Managing difficult behaviours is never easy but it's central to creating a cohesive team and a great workplace culture.