

## Identifying Problematic Employee Behaviors

Do you ever encounter an employee who says, "I can't help that I'm late, my alarm clock did not go off on time"? Or maybe you hear this type of comment: "I don't know why I should have to do this project anyway. This was NOT in my job description"? What about, "I work better under pressure; I can get it done later." Hearing these excuses on a frequent basis can be stressful and frustrating, but this is typical if you manage employees with problematic behaviors. In an ideal world, a successful business would run smoothly and efficiently with everyone working effectively as a team and treating each other with mutual respect. Staff morale, productivity and customer service would function at a high level. In reality, companies struggle with morale, put processes in place to keep productivity high, and constantly deal with employees and relationships. The responsibility to maintain a positive office environment is often placed in the hands of the management team. Managers do not only get paid for what they do, but for what their employees who work under them do. Good managers recognize this and should do what they can to help their employees succeed. However, even good managers have their share of challenges. Typically, those challenges come in the form of employees' problematic behaviors.

Problematic behaviors can come in many forms, and it can be tricky to manage them successfully. In any business environment, it is expected that employees will conform to the parameters that the business has set up to function effectively. When employees do not achieve what an employer expects of them, problems arise quickly. Three typical problematic behaviors are ineffectualness, negativity and procrastination.

## Ineffectual Employees

The ineffectual employee is one who possesses performance issues, such as problems with punctuality, dependability, work proficiency, enthusiasm or has poor peer relations. These performance issues can cause a work environment to run inefficiently.

An important step a manager must take when addressing an ineffectual employee is identifying the facts. Taking notice of an employee's tardiness three days in one week is a factual observance. When obtaining the facts, ask these questions:

- What is it about the behavior that has an adverse impact on the work being done?
- What things are actually seen and heard that indicate there is a problem?
- What things should the employee do, or has not done that would solve the problem?

These questions help define the problem and confront a problematic employee. Generally, employees want to do their job well, and if confronted in a positive way, will agree to change problematic behaviors.

## Negative Employees

Punctual, compliant, deadline driven -- does this sound like the dream employee? Typically the negative employee possesses many of these attributes. However, at the same time they can seek out things to complain about, and often times stir up discontent in their co-workers, undermining and contaminating the work environment. These types of employees pose a particularly difficult situation for management because it is more difficult to evaluate non-objective work performance.

When confronting a negative employee, management should carefully observe and record the behavior. Approaching an employee about a negative attitude requires a degree of preparation. You may want to ask another manager or your Human Resource Department to validate the behaviors you have observed. Once discussion has begun, a manager may offer the employee assistance and ask them what can be done to turn their negative behavior into positive behavior. Remember these three important guidelines to successfully discuss this issue:



Negativity cannot be changed with negativity. It is important to refrain from acting negative. Remain positive when talking with the negative employee.

Keep expectations low. Do not expect an apology and do not expect the negative employee to admit to this behavior. It is important to employees that their manager believes in them, even when they are being disciplined. Always end a disciplinary discussion with a positive "I know you can do it" statement.

### The Procrastinators

This last behavior is often seen in combination with the first two. An employee who is constantly postponing projects and tasks and presenting low quality work can be classified as a procrastinator. Procrastination can be caused by negative feelings and thoughts such as:

- **Fear:** An employee fears a negative outcome by engaging in or completing a given task. Managers dealing with this situation can help reassure employees that they will not be blamed for the negative outcome. Most times these fears are unfounded and irrational.
- **Anger:** The employee is resentful when given the task or project to complete; therefore, rebel by delaying the task. A manager should provide the employee with a choice in how to complete the task or project, therefore reducing the amount of rebellion.
- **Hopelessness:** The employee feels that any project sets them up for a lose-lose situation; they will lose if the task is completed and lose if they don't. In this case, a manager can coach the employee on the best alternatives and what the employee will gain or "win" down the road.
- **Perfectionist Thinking:** This employee may think that a given project must be absolutely perfect and that it can only be perfect when the conditions are right. It is best for a manager in this situation to explain to the individual the balance between efficiency and quality. Also, high quality work does not mean the work must be completely free of minuscule errors.
- **Last-minute Crisis Thinking:** These people think that they work best under pressure, therefore delaying the projects or task in order to perform under pressure. This may work for some, but if employees work as part of a team, they may cause problems for their peers. Managers of these procrastinators must explain that this type of thinking creates a crisis for their co-workers even if it is productive for them.
- **Denial Thinking:** Employees in this category believe they do not really need to complete a project or task on time. Many times these procrastinators have a lot on their plate and are waiting to catch up to begin the given task. In this case, it is good for a manager to provide these types of employees with tools to teach them better time management.

### Summary

Companies need rules in order to run successfully and it is the managers who must ensure that employees adhere to these rules. In any situation where a manager must confront their employees regarding problematic behavior, it is important to remember to present the facts, follow-up, document the behavior, offer assistance, and be fair.

There will always be employees with ineffectual, negative and/or procrastinating behaviors. Solving these problems with good communication and relationship building will help a manager effectively create a positive working environment for both employees and management. Treating people with dignity, respect and fairness will keep employee relations on the right track and help ensure the success of the company.

