



## **MANAGING DIFFICULT EMPLOYEES AND DISRUPTIVE BEHAVIORS**

A number of disruptive behaviors often exhibited by employees can create risks for other individuals and the agency.

Some of the most frequent actions taken by disruptive or problematic employees include:

- Making rude, condescending, insulting and demeaning statements to others.
- Using angry, hostile tones.
- Shouting, throwing things or slamming doors when displeased.
- Berating staff and colleagues in front of others.
- Showing insensitive, curt and disrespectful treatment of peers, staff or clients.
- Being physically or verbally abusive toward others.
- Attacking immediately if criticized or questioned.
- Threatening litigation when displeased or challenged.
- Disdaining authority and believing that rules do not apply to them.
- Regularly being the source of many issues that, if taken singly, would be of limited relevance, but when taken together, become highly significant.

When several of these negative behaviors occur, they can rise to the level of workplace bullying, a destructive form of interpersonal abuse. These behaviors cause problems that should be addressed by managers to minimize the negative impact on the agency.

Even "lower level" disruptive behaviors in the workplace—the type of behavior that does not quite reach the level of bullying or harassment—creates a wide range of spillover effects.

### **Causes and Enabling Factors**

Disruptive employee behavior at work has many causes. Some disruptive individuals suffer from psychological disorders and chronic physical conditions. Others may be impaired because of drugs and alcohol use. Still others may be experiencing personal turmoil (e.g., marital, family-related or financial problems) that negatively affects their ability to deal with their colleagues in a civil and professional manner. Some are unable or no longer willing to cope with the workplace stressors that exist in today's difficult business environment. Finally, some are individuals who have simply acquired the belief that they will, more often than not, get the results they desire by bullying, abusing and intimidating others.

Managers and colleagues are often unwilling to intervene or complain about a disruptive colleague. It may be that they are sympathetic toward their colleague's issues and share his or her frustrations or think of themselves as similar in kind, if not degree, and therefore feel they have no right to be critical. Other managers and co-workers fear getting involved in the problems of others, do not want to harm the career opportunities of a peer, or worry that intervention may provoke an even more serious or violent reaction. Managers who work in departments that are short-staffed are often reluctant to do anything that might lead to losing a staff member.

Unfortunately, the problem will not usually go away if it is tolerated or ignored. It will, in fact, probably worsen. The disruptive individual may interpret a boss's tolerance of inappropriate behavior as accepting or condoning the behavior and continue or escalate the behavior. Managers have a legal and ethical obligation to investigate complaints or other evidence of



such behavior and to prevent its reoccurrence by taking prompt, appropriate remedial action. If the organization ignores the problem, it runs the risk of condoning unprofessional behavior and becomes vulnerable to potential legal liability.

### **Strategies for Dealing with Difficult Employees and Disruptive Behaviors**

Dealing with a difficult employee requires a measure of grace and patience. Despite a manager's best efforts, some difficult employees may be unwilling or unable to change their disruptive behaviors or attitudes. In such situations, formal discipline and even termination may be necessary.

The steps supervisors should take to effectively manage a difficult or disruptive employee and to avoid the necessity of formal discipline or termination include the following:

- Problem identification.
- A constructive discussion of problem behaviors with the employee.
- Anticipation of the employee's likely reaction and an appropriate response to the employee's actual reaction to the discussion.
- Documentation of the discussion.
- Follow-up with the employee.

A primary purpose of meeting with a disruptive employee is to reach an agreement that a problem exists. Managers should hold the meeting in a private place to avoid distractions or interruptions. They should also schedule it with sufficient time to complete the discussion. The manager should begin by stating the purpose of the meeting and by providing reassurance that the intent is to gain an understanding of the employee's perspective on the issue, not to blame the employee or establish guilt or innocence. The manager may want to state upfront that he or she will give the employee a chance to add any information that is relevant to the resolution of the situation.

Corrective action or progressive discipline may need to be taken depending on the severity of the situation or specific incident.

A psychological disorder or alcohol or chemical abuse may contribute to an employee's behavioral problem. In these situations, a consultation or referral to the agency's employee assistance program (EAP) is appropriate. Referral to a community-based anger management program may also be justified. Regardless, the presence of impairment does not excuse the behavior, and corrective action should be taken if it does not stop.

### **Anticipate the employee's response**

It is difficult for anyone to be confronted with unacceptable behavior. A manager must be prepared for a variety of responses when speaking to an employee about disruptive behaviors. Common employee responses may include the following:

- Anger or intimidation. Employees may become belligerent and hostile, raise their voices or insult the manager. Unless the manager is concerned that these behaviors may escalate to aggression or violence, the manager should let the employee vent. The manager should then paraphrase the employee's feelings and reiterate that the matter is a serious one that will be addressed despite the employee's attempts to divert attention from the issue.



- Tears or emotional despair. Another common response to criticism is a tearful display. The employee's response should be respected as genuine. Many times, it is sufficient to simply observe, "I see you are very upset, and I understand these issues may be difficult for you to discuss. Would you like to stop for a few minutes?" Most employees will choose to go on.
- Complaining or blaming. Employees may claim that they have done nothing wrong, or they may try to shift the blame for their misbehavior to others. When this occurs, the manager should provide very specific details and incidences of disruptive behaviors.
- Silent treatment. If an employee does not respond when confronted about unacceptable behavior, the manager should invite the employee to talk or ask open-ended questions to encourage the employee to talk. Alternatively, the manager can pause until the employee becomes uncomfortable with the pause and begins speaking. When the person does speak, the manager should practice active listening.
- Unwilling to resolve. If an employee is not willing to acknowledge the problem or feels that the discussion has not resulted in a fair solution, the manager should reiterate his or her expectations of the employee, close the meeting and schedule another time to further discuss unresolved issues. If the employee still fails to accept accountability for his or her behavior, the manager and the organization can establish that the employee had a fair opportunity to participate in the problem-solving process.

The key to managing difficult or disruptive employees is to distinguish the person from his or her behaviors. Managers should honor an employee's right to be treated professionally, courteously and respectfully. This aligns equity on the side of the manager and allows the relationship to survive the problem.

### **Document the discussion**

Disruptive individuals are, by their nature, more likely to challenge disciplinary actions or other efforts to correct their behavior. The manager must accurately and thoroughly document the employee's misconduct using concrete examples and specific details.

### **Follow up with the employee**

One of the most common mistakes managers make is to have the appropriate conversation with an employee, consider the matter closed and put away the file. The greatest factor in sustaining improvements in performance is follow-up. Any improvement after a performance incident should be recognized. Even if an employee has not perfected the problem, recognition of improvement cements and furthers the employee's efforts. On the other hand, if problem behaviors are not corrected despite positive coaching, the employee should be held accountable for continued failure to meet the expected agency standards. Nothing will affect the morale of other employees faster than watching unacceptable performance go unaddressed, or worse, be addressed and then tolerated, which suggests that the manager is incapable of dealing with the situation.

### **Communication**

When agencies communicate clear expectations—in writing, verbally and through the managers' actions—the workforce will be able to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.



If an agency does not require accountability and fails to communicate consistent expectations for its employees, a number of risks may emerge, including:

- Grievances, discrimination complaints or hostile work environment claims.
- Lawsuits against the individual for his or her conduct and against the agency for its failure to control or prevent it.
- Increased workers' compensation claims alleging disabling workplace stress.
- Considerable expenditures of time, energy and money responding to and defending against legal and health-related claims.
- Increased use of sick leave.
- Negative public perceptions.
- Drain on employee morale and productivity.
- Turnover of talented employees.
- Decreased quality of service to clients and customers.

### **Legal Issues**

Keeping all disciplinary conversations focused on the employee's actual performance is important. Although discrimination and harassment laws prohibit employers from making employment decisions based on an employee's membership in a protected class, basing decisions on performance prevents even an inadvertent violation of these laws. Even if an employee feels he or she is the victim of discrimination or harassment, concentrating on performance helps maintain the focus on the true employment issues at hand, keeps the employer compliant, and shows respect for employees and their rights in the workplace.

Managers should ensure that conflicts are resolved early on because it is part of an overall agency strategy to prevent workplace violence from occurring.

Always consult with human resources and/or legal counsel. We will be glad to assist you in identifying problems and strategize possible solutions.

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