

Thoughts On Dealing With Difficult Employees

"Happiness is often the result of being too busy to be miserable." Anon.

Do you manage or supervise difficult employees? Ever think you're alone? You're not. Most likely your difficult employee is someone you've inherited. Not someone you would've hired. Yet somehow they fell through the cracks and got hired anyway. Now, it's your job to do the cleanup work.

Thoughts shape our words, which shape our actions. Negative people produce negative results, not to mention more negative people in the workplace. Attitude really is everything. The number one complaint I hear from managers and supervisors when conducting speaking engagements is, "My difficult employee is hard to be around, and they're making my life and everybody else's miserable!" And, you and your employees have a right to come to work and enjoy it. I tactfully told that to one of my chronically difficult employees when I was a manager and it worked.

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It's easy to internalize all the negative behaviors of your difficult employees and then attempt to find ways to change them. Most people cannot be changed unless they want to change. Sometimes nothing will motivate them. Another comment often heard is, "They're just here to collect a paycheck. They are doing the absolute minimum to get by." I call these people the "work-the-system" workers.

In my workshops, we go into a specific action plan on how to turn them around, get them motivated and producing results. Most likely the previous manager or supervisor was non-confrontational. The employee "tested" them and knew what they could get away with. It's called learned behavior. And if you don't take action, it will reflect negatively on YOU. The other employees start to wonder why you're not doing something about it.

If the difficult employee is simply motivated by a paycheck, often what finally motivates them is receiving progressive disciplinary action and knowing you have specific documentation to back up their underperformance. Knowing they may be out of work can be a last-house-on-the-block approach for the difficult employee. Sometimes even that doesn't work because they're simply biding their time. Knowing they will be fired eventually, or retiring "soon."

Often managers and supervisors exclaim, "Oh, but we're union, we're different." Or, "We're government employees and it takes years to fire them." True. Research shows that it can take a great deal more time to terminate a difficult employee under these circumstances. Not to mention endless documentation. It will require thorough documentation showing everything you, and everyone else, has done in an attempt to "save" the employee.

Oh, I know what you're thinking. "But Colleen, I'm overloaded and I feel like I'm spending 80% of my time with the 20% of my difficult employees. I don't have TIME to document! I just can't afford that luxury of time!" Well, you can't afford not to document. If only I had a dollar for every manager or supervisor who has confided to me that NOT documenting came back to haunt them. Unfortunately, you must document in detail what the difficult employee is or isn't doing.

If you are union or managing government employees, and you have to throw out their records after one year, consider writing down past problem behavior in their performance review. Performance reviews aren't always thrown out. Even when supervising or managing government or union employees. Check with your Human Resources department and your manager to make sure you're up-to-date on dealing with a difficult employee effectively.

Remember, the documentation is not to build a case for termination, but to record what you attempted to do to help the difficult employee. Ask yourself, "Did I do everything I could? What, if anything, is my part in this?" If you've done all you can, the rest is up to the employee.

In my "Dealing with Difficult Employees" program I frequently hear, "I did everything I could, and ultimately the person fired themselves." I think that is often the case. Especially with the difficult employee you've "inherited" but wouldn't necessarily have hired. Sometimes the difficult employee isn't a bad person. Maybe they just weren't the right person for the job, or their job description evolved and they haven't evolved with it. Maybe the manager before you was non-confrontational and enabled the behavior. Unfortunately, you have to be the "bad guy." You must be the one who takes action. Otherwise, you now have a part in it in that you enabled the difficult employee's behavior.

Something managers and supervisors sometimes will confide in me "Colleen, after your presentation, I'm beginning to wonder if I might be a difficult person!" This is a step in the right direction. What part of YOU needs to change? Ask yourself, "How can I react differently to these difficult employees in the future?"

You can't change the difficult employee. All you can do is change how you react to them. You can change the

environment and hope they become motivated. This often works when they know you're taking progressive disciplinary steps and may ultimately terminate them.

It can be easier to look at the faults of others. It makes it easier not to have to focus on ourselves. That is the hard part. Remember though...it's also the part we can control.

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