

Tips for Dealing with Employee Problem Behavior

If you've been a manager for long, you know that things can go wrong even in the best of organizations. Problem behavior on the part of employees can erupt for a variety of reasons. Here are ten tips for dealing with it.

1. Recognize that problem behavior usually has a history.

It usually develops over time and seldom from a single incident. As a manager, it is your responsibility to be alert to the early warning signs and deal with the underlying causes before the situation reaches a crisis.

2. Ask yourself: "Am I partly or wholly responsible?"

You would be surprised how frequently it is the manager who has created, or at least contributed to problems of employee behavior. Having an abrasive style, being unwilling to listen, and being inattentive to the nuances of employee behavior are all factors that contribute to the manager's need to thoroughly examine what is going on.

3. Don't focus only on the overt behavior.

When confronted by an angry employee, it's easy to attack the person and target the behavior rather than examine the factors that underlie the behavior. Often, this takes patience, careful probing, and a willingness to forgo judgment until you really understand the situation.

4. Be attentive to the "awkward silence" and to what is not said.

When an employee is obviously reluctant to communicate, it's almost a sure sign that more lurks beneath the surface. Often, employees will hold back because they feel unsafe. They may test the waters by airing a less severe or kindred issue in order to see what kind of a response they get. In order to get the full story and encourage forthrightness, it's imperative that the manager read between the lines and offer the concern and support necessary to get the employee to open up.

5. Clarify before you confront.

Chances are, when an issue first surfaces, you will be given only a fragmentary and partial picture of the problem. You may have to dig deep to surface important facts, and talk to others who may be involved. One safe assumption is that each person will tend to present the case from his or her viewpoint, which may or may not be the way it really is. Discretion and careful fact-finding are often required to get a true picture.

6. Be willing to explore the possibility that you have contributed to the problem.

This isn't easy, even if you have reason to believe it's so, because you may not be fully aware of what you have done to fuel the fire. Three helpful questions to ask yourself: "Is this problem unique, or does it have a familiar ring as having happened before?", "Are others in my organization exhibiting similar behaviors?", and finally, "Am I partially the cause of the behavior I am criticizing in others?"

7. Plan your strategy.

Start by defining, for yourself, what changes you would like to see take place, then, follow this sequence: (1) Tell the person that there is a problem. State the problem as you understand it and explain why it is important that it be resolved; (2) Gain agreement that you've defined the problem correctly, and that the employee understands that it must be solved; (3) Ask for solutions, using open-ended questions such as: "What are you willing to do to correct this problem?" In some cases, you may have to make it clear what you expect; (4) Get a dedication that the employee will take the required actions; (5) Set deadlines for finishing the actions. In the case of a repeated problem, you may want to advise the employee of the consequences of failing to take corrective action; (6) Follow up on the deadlines you've set.

8. Treat the employee as an adult and expect adult behavior.

To some extent, expectation defines the result. If you indicate, by your actions or by the content or tone of your voice, that you expect less than full adult behavior, that's what you're likely to get.

9. Treat interpersonal conflicts differently.

If the problem behavior stems from a personality conflict between two employees, have each one answer these questions: (1) How would you describe the other person? (2) How does he or she make you feel? (3) Why do you feel that the other person behaves the way he/she does? (4) What might you be able to do to alleviate the situation? (5) What would you like the other person to do in return?

10. Seek agreement regarding steps to be taken and results expected.

Nothing is really "fixed" unless it stays fixed. All parties to a dispute must agree that the steps taken (or proposed) will substantially alleviate the problem. Further, they must agree on what they will do if the results attained are not as anticipated.