

# DEALING WITH DIFFICULT EMPLOYEES

**There will always be difficult employees,  
and as a manager, it is your job to deal with  
the problem before it gets worse.**

## **WHY ARE DIFFICULT EMPLOYEES LIKE THAT?**

Difficult employees are that way simply because it is a behaviour that has worked for them in the past. They may not know any other behaviour, or they may choose this behaviour when they think it will be most effective. You will be successful in dealing with difficult employees only by making their undesirable behaviours no longer effective for them.

In many ways, it's like dealing with children. If their parents give them candy every time they scream, what will the children do when they want candy? They'll scream, of course. The same is true of employees who "blow up" whenever anyone disagrees with them. If people stop disagreeing with them every time they blow up, they've won.

## **HOW CAN A MANAGER DEAL WITH DIFFICULT EMPLOYEES?**

### **Evaluate**

When dealing with difficult employees, it is important to act quickly. However, you must first take the time to evaluate the situation before you act. You don't want to make it worse.

Recognize that most employees can be difficult from time to time, often due to stress on the job, or away from it. Some employees are difficult more often than others. And it is not always your least productive employees who are difficult. So take a moment to evaluate each situation.

### **Do your homework**

Always act on facts. Don't base your actions on gossip or rumour. People spreading gossip are difficult employees in their own way. If you have not seen the inappropriate behaviour yourself, look into it. Ask the people reportedly involved. Collect all the facts. The fact that you haven't seen the inappropriate behaviour is no excuse to delay doing something. It is important to act promptly.

Make sure you aren't part of the problem. If you are partly responsible for the difficult behaviour, it will be much more difficult to remain calm and impartial in confronting it. In that case, acknowledge your role in the matter, at least to yourself.



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## AIM FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT RATHER THAN TRYING TO ACHIEVE INSTANT SUCCESS.

### Develop a plan

As a manager, you know the value of planning. You need to plan the timing of the confrontation; select a quiet, private place where you won't be interrupted; and decide whether you need to have others, like an HR representative, present in the meeting. Plan the confrontation and then make it happen.

Once you have prepared, it is time to act. Do not act impulsively, but act quickly. The longer an inappropriate behaviour is allowed to continue, the harder it will be to change it or stop it.

### Confront the problem

Don't put it off. It may not be pleasant, but it's an important part of your job. It will not fix itself. It can only get worse. You have planned this confrontation. Now you need to execute.

### Deal with the behaviour, not the person

Your goal is to develop a solution, not to win. Focus on the inappropriate behaviour; don't attack the person. Use "I" statements like "I need everybody on the team here on time so we can meet our goals" rather than "you" statements like "You are always late".

Don't assume the inappropriate behaviour is caused by negative intent. It may be from fear, confusion, lack of motivation, or even personal problems.

Give the other person a chance to develop a solution to the problem. They are more likely to "own" the solution if they are at least partially responsible for developing it.

### Try to draw out the reasons behind the behaviour

As you talk with the difficult employee, actively listen to what they say. Stay calm and positive, but remain impartial and non-judgmental. Ask leading questions that can't be answered in one or two words. Don't interrupt.

When you do respond to the difficult employee, remain calm. Summarize what they just said, "So what I understand you are saying is...", so they know you are actually listening to them.

If you can discover the real source of the inappropriate behaviour, you have a much better chance of finding a solution. These confrontations may go smoothly and rapidly to a conclusion; or they may require several sessions to resolve the problem.

### Repeat as necessary

You may be able to resolve minor problems, like being late for work, with a simple chat in your office with the employee. An office bully, who has used that behaviour successfully since elementary school, may need more than one confrontation before a solution can be reached. Be patient. Don't always expect instant results. Aim for continuous improvement rather than trying to achieve instant success.

### Know when you are in over your head

Sometimes the underlying issue with a difficult employee will be beyond your capabilities. For example, the employee may have psychological problems that require professional help. Learn when to keep trying

and when to refer the employee to others for more specialized help. Your company may have an employee assistance program (EAP), or you may need to use resources from the community.

### Know when you are at the end

While your goal is to reach a mutually acceptable solution that resolves the difficult employee's inappropriate behaviour and keeps your team at full strength, sometimes that is not possible. If you reach an impasse where the employee is not willing to change their behaviour, you need to begin termination procedures in accordance with your company's policies.

### COMING TO A SOLUTION

The desired result from confronting a difficult employee's inappropriate behaviour is an agreed upon solution. You know that this inappropriate behaviour will continue unless you and the employee agree on a solution. The employee needs to know what is inappropriate about their behaviour and to know what is appropriate behaviour. The need for a manager to communicate clearly is always high. It is especially important in these situations. Make very sure the employee understands the requirements, and the consequences.

DBR

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