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Six Ways to Deal with Difficult Employees

The biggest challenge for many managers is dealing with difficult employees. They come in many forms. Some are chronic pessimists, always seeing things in the most negative light. Some are antagonistic and delight in criticizing everyone else's work. Some are withdrawn and passive, difficult to coach or motivate. Some are agreeable, but don't deliver on what they agree to do. Dealing with difficult employees is one of the most stressful aspects of being a manager, if not the most stressful. What are some strategies for working with these employees and improving your effectiveness as a manager?

Imagine this scenario: You're in the checkout line at the grocery store when someone behind you rams a shopping cart hard into your heels, causing you pain. What emotion are you likely to experience? Disbelief? Anger? Maybe both.

Then you turn around and realize that the person pushing the cart is blind. What emotions are you likely to feel now? Empathy? Understanding? Certainly not anger.

The event didn't change. Only your thoughts did. You went from thinking someone was inconsiderate and rude, to thinking the person didn't mean to do it. The point is that external events, including other people's actions, don't cause our emotional reactions. Our thoughts about those events do.

All of this leads to the primary rule of dealing with difficult employees: You must take control of the one person you can control – yourself.

None of the strategies for dealing with difficult employees relies on the other person changing because you have no control over that. All you can control are your own thoughts and actions – what you choose to do in response to another person's behaviors.

Here are some strategies for managing difficult employees – and your response to them.

1. Focus on the behavior, not the person. It really is the behavior that is difficult, not the employee. And it's the behavior that you need to manage. Keeping this in mind takes some of the intensity out of your interactions with the person.
2. Remind yourself that the employee may not know any other way. Difficult behavior is usually the result of early life experiences and faulty social learning. Sometimes, people don't even know they're being difficult. Remembering this helps you to not take their behavior personally.
3. Do the opposite of your natural inclination. Often, the worse someone else's behavior is, the worse our behavior becomes in response to it. If they start shouting, we shout back. If they sulk and engage in passive-aggressive behavior, we do the same. Instead, try doing the opposite. If your employee raises her voice, try lowering yours. If you feel like defending yourself, be agreeable instead. This changes the "dance."
4. Analyze the tangible consequences of their behavior. Does it hurt productivity or morale, or is it merely annoying? This helps you decide which battles are worth fighting. Ask yourself whether addressing the behavior is worth the time and emotional fallout for you and the employee. If the behavior is not very important, confronting it may do more harm than good.
5. Practice constructive confrontation for behaviors that have significant consequences. Talk to the employee about a problem behavior. Explain in neutral, objective terms what the employee is doing and how it affects others and the company. State the changes you want the employee to make. Be specific, use behavioral terms, and give time frames for making the changes. Explain

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the next step if the employee fails to change – basically, that means to describe your company's progressive discipline policy.

6. Let go of it. Once you've done your part, it's up to the employee to choose whether to adjust his actions or face the consequences. Let your discipline policy guide what you do, but don't invest too much emotional energy in the outcome. You're not in control of other people's actions, and it's not wise to become too invested in things you can't control.

If you supervise people, you no doubt have already come across employees you would classify as "difficult." As a manager, it's your job to understand how to work with them, and ideally, help them become more productive members of your team.

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