

Things They Don't Teach You in Management Training

I once had a boss who, when hiring a Manager would half jokingly tell the Staffing Manager, "If they say they like working with people, don't hire them!" She knew that "working with people" is arguably the most difficult aspect of a Manager's job. Training prepares Managers to delegate, motivate, influence, coach, communicate, recognize and strategize. Often it does not prepare a Manager for the difficult employee who is resistant to most motivating, influencing, coaching, and recognition techniques.

The key to managing the difficult employee is to decisively deal with their performance, behavior or attitude very early on. Unfortunately some organizations develop a tolerance for negative behavior and unwittingly reinforce it by ignoring it, managing around it and hoping the problem employee soon quits or retires.

Most employees will not cause a Manager's hair to turn gray. But then, it only takes a few dillies to transform the darkest brunette to snow white. What makes an employee difficult? Usually, it is a problem in performance, behavior or attitude. No surprise there, right? But what about the employee whose performance persistently "hugs the line?" And, what about "poor attitude" in an employee? The courts only care if an employee is performing his or her job and not about the "attitude" of an employee. So, what's a manager to do?

First let's look at our "line hugger." You know...the type that works hard at hardly working. The barely marginal employee not only hugs the line most of the year but confounds the Manager by raising the level of his or her performance sometime within the last quarter of the performance review cycle. As the Manager struggles to write the "line hugger's" review, you can almost see the natural hair color begin to fade.

As with all poor performers, a Manager must determine if the employee lacks the information, skill, or motivation to do the job. A performance improvement plan (PIP) combined with regularly scheduled coaching sessions will provide the answer. Generally speaking, a well written 60 day PIP that includes specific tasks, objectives and deadlines accompanied by weekly coaching sessions with the Manager will do the trick. (Of course, Human Resources should be actively involved in this process.)

If the employee rises to the occasion it is a win for the Manager in two ways. The employee has now demonstrated he or she can do the job effectively. And, the Manager has the documentation to prove it. At the end of the PIP period, a memo written to document the now "effective" performance needs to include language that states the effective level must be "sustained." If the employee reverts to "hugging the line," the Manager can now safely consider termination. During the PIP period, the weekly coaching sessions will help the Manager determine if the employee needs additional training in order to be more effective. The PIP period can always be extended to allow time for further development.

Employees that really hasten the graying process are those who have a bad "attitude" but acceptable performance. Is it possible to have a bad attitude and good performance? It is not only possible, but there are people whose entire being seems wrapped up in maintaining these seemingly opposite values. This type person will have a Manager reaching for antacids on a regular basis. Can the hair dye be far behind?

But maintaining good performance with a poor attitude is tricky. Even those who are good at it will slip every now and then. Here are a few examples of how to handle some difficult types:

The Passive Aggressive/Passive Resistant Employee

The passive-aggressive is the intentional bully and the passive resistant is the sneaky bully. Both these types are people who do not or cannot deal with the feeling of anger. But make no mistake. They are angry and will look for opportunities to "stick it" to the Manager or anyone else who has the nerve to tick them off.

For example, the passive-aggressive employee assigned to a project he or she doesn't like will intentionally provide bad or poorly researched information, skip meetings, spread rumors, openly criticize the boss or refuse to accept the helpful suggestions of co-workers. The sneaky bully will "yes" a Manager to death but seldom delivers on promises. This bully will intentionally "forget" commitments, be chronically late for meetings, miss deadlines,

strategically call in sick on days critical to the Manager or project, intentionally leave out data or information or find other ways to “inadvertently” make a Manager look foolish.

Talking to the employee is always an option but this type behavior is not likely to change. These employees are very manipulative. Managers need to understand that anger is the underlying emotion and not be intimidated by the employee’s behavior or manage “around” it. Remember, they don’t handle anger well. The more the Manager holds them accountable for their lapses, the angrier they will become. They angrier they become the more likely they are to give the Manager cause to formally address their behavior or conduct. Ultimately the employee may learn to save this behavior for other unsuspecting soles and be more circumspect with the Manager.

The Victim

Never underestimate the power of helplessness. To clarify, the “Victim” is not the good employee who has an occasional personal problem that may interfere with work. The Victim is a problem employee who *always* has a “poor me” story and an interminable number of reasons why he or she must leave early, can’t finish an assignment, can’t meet a deadline, etc. “Can’t is their modus operandi. Inevitably, some co-workers will feel sorry for the Victim and pick up the slack while others, who are wise to the Victim’s tactics, will sit and steam. A chronic victim impacts the morale of the entire workgroup. Those who “steam” want desperately for the Manager to intervene.

To effectively manage the Victim, a Manager must first get the Victim’s rescuers to stop “helping.” It is easy to get lured into feeling sorry for the Victim as their problems can be legitimate. But we all have problems and it is how we handle them that determines whether we become victims for victors. Deal with this employee by making a referral to the Employee Assistance Program. If you don’t have one...get one. Some EAPs even offer services on a case-by-case basis.

When not talking about personal problems, the Victim is one who usually asks a lot of “why” (or whine) questions. Such as:

- Why is this happening to me?
- Why do we have to go through all this change?
- Why did they hire her?
- Why doesn’t he/she/they communicate better?
- Why don’t you give me more of your time?

Victims are excellent procrastinators and ask a lot of “when” questions such as:

- When will you take care of this problem?
- When will we get the information we need?
- When will we get more resources?

A Manager needs to talk to a Victim in a way that puts responsibility back on the employee. Start by countering with “how” and “when” questions that focus on action, such as:

- What have you done to help solve the problem?
- What are you doing that contributes to this problem?
- What could you do to better understand each person in the office?
- What efforts have you made to adapt to change?
- What can you do right now to change this situation?
- How can you achieve your goal with the resources you already have?
- How can you do your job better today?
- What do you think you need to do in order to contribute more to the team?

Using this tactic will frustrate the Victim and reinforce the expectation of accountability. The Victim will realize the gig is up and, in order to avoid a performance warning, shelve the avoidance tactics. However, because these tactics did work at one time, they are hard to give up. The Manager will have to remain vigilant and ensure the workgroup doesn’t revert to “rescue” mode.

The Injustice Collector

There are people who are “right” and there are people to *have* to be right. Welcome to the “Injustice Collector.” Injustice collectors are always “wronged” but are *never* wrong. This employee would rather alienate everyone than admit being wrong. To an Injustice Collector, alienation is proof that their superiority sets them apart from everyone else. Since *they* can never be wrong, everybody else must be! This employee is an expert at putting people on the defensive. Managing this employee can feel like being on trial every day of the week. Managers must resist the bait and not get drawn into a debate or get defensive with this type person.

Blame is the modus operandi of the Injustice Collector. Blame is also a block to responsibility. The Manager can put the blame game into “check” by not entertaining a debate and insisting on personal responsibility. This can be done by posing questions similar to those listed above.

There are lots of ways an employee can drive a Manager crazy. Before you turn prematurely gray, call us to discuss an employee relations nightmare at 908-852-0291 or submit your question at www.kiernanconsulting.com