

Get Tough With A Toxic Employee

Question: "One of my employees has a toxic attitude. He criticizes co-workers, blames them for his problems and argues about everything. His rude and insensitive emails imply that everyone is an idiot, including me. We have had many long, drawn-out debates about these issues. Sometimes, I feel like we're making progress, but then he'll send another complaining e-mail. Talking things through with him clearly doesn't help. I'm emotionally drained and have no idea what to do next." — Worn Out

Marie's Answer: Your "long, drawn-out debates" are actually rewarding his toxic behavior. Like little kids, immature employees crave attention. And this guy is getting plenty of it, without any negative consequences. Use your managerial authority to set clear performance expectations. Meet with him to deliver the following message:

His job performance problems need to be addressed. You will not debate this issue, and you just want him to listen. His constant, critical comments must stop. You expect him to become a pleasant, cooperative co-worker. He must copy you on every email he sends out for the next six weeks. You no longer will listen to complaints or discuss co-workers with him. He needs to focus on his own work, not theirs. You want to help him succeed, so you will meet weekly with him to assess his progress. If he chooses not to change, then he chooses to lose his job.

Do not allow him to debate or argue. When you finish, stand up and end the meeting. Then, in your weekly assessments, praise progress, point out problems and provide coaching. But if he fails to improve, let him go. You'll be better off without him. If you have a soft management style, this corrective action will feel uncomfortable. Fortunately, most performance issues don't require such a harsh approach. But employees who try to run over their managers need to find out who's in charge.