

Six steps for managing 'difficult' employees



Working alongside difficult people can be hard enough. But managing someone with whom you have a personality clash can cause major tension.

Experienced managers know how to separate emotions from the work at hand when dealing with employees. Rather than dwelling on an employee's negative personality traits, smart managers focus on tasks, projects and results. They don't allow their personal feelings to interfere, and they treat everyone the same way.

But in too many cases, managers simply turn away from their least favorite employees. Rather than interacting with them, they avoid them. What's worse, managers may just write off the problem employees and do the employees' jobs themselves.

Turning your back on difficult employees isn't just a management mistake—it can also create legal trouble. That's because employees who frequently bump heads with management are also the ones who are most likely to file lawsuits when they feel they're being treated unfairly.

That's why, when confronted with employees who don't do what's asked, it's best to devise a strategy for making the best of a potentially explosive situation.

Although it may be hard to transform a difficult employee into a warm, friendly ally, you can take the following steps to make it easier for the employee to comply:

1. Confront problems head-on. If you don't like an employee, that person probably feels the same way about you. By clearing the air and calmly acknowledging any ill will, you can help the employee focus on getting the job done.

Use phrases such as this to level with the person: *"When I ask you to do something, I need to rely on you. I realize we're very different people, but we can't let that stop us from doing our jobs."*

2. Seek confirmation. When giving instructions, don't assume that you're making yourself clear. Ask the employee to explain what you just said and what you expect of him or her.

3. Rehearse. Making simple requests is painless. But if you must explain something more complicated, don't wing it. You may waste time backtracking or jumbling words.

As you rehearse, use the fewest words possible to describe your goal. Boil down the expected outcome to its essentials.

Once you find a concise way to summarize the outcome you want, write it down and memorize the key phrase that captures the main point.

4. Speak and write. To ensure that the employee understands you, assign tasks both orally and in print. Get in the habit of talking with that person and telling him or her what you need. Let the employee ask questions and offer suggestions. Then, follow up soon after the discussion with an email or memo that summarizes what's expected, along with the timetable for the project.

5. Stick to behavior. When managing someone with an attitude problem, don't let the person's personality interfere with the job at hand. Focus on describing the work that you need done.

Avoid lacing your comments with any quips or cynical asides about the person's spotty track records on complying with your past requests. What you may view as a harmless jab ("Maybe you'll hit the deadline this time") may make the employee even more jaded and resistant to help.

6. Talk on the employee's turf. If you have a personality conflict with a certain employee, the last thing you should do is make him or her feel "bossed around" when you assign a task.

A practical way to encourage such employees to comply is to meet in their offices, not yours. Calling employees into your office to assign a task could instantly put them on the defensive.

Self-Test: Gaining compliance from stubborn employees

For each statement, rate your answers from 1 to 5 using this scale:

1 = never

2 = occasionally

3 = sometimes

4 = usually

5 = always

1. When I ask my least favorite employee to do something, I don't mind if the employee doesn't "get it" the first time. I'm willing to repeat myself in a patient tone.
2. When I give instructions, I allow employees to ask questions and express any reservations about the task.
3. My personal dislike of an employee doesn't influence how I communicate when I assign a task.
4. Whenever I give instructions, I plan what I'm going to say.
5. When I ask my least favorite employee to do something, I stick to describing the task, without injecting any personal comments.
6. When I ask my least favorite employee to do something, I always explain the overall goal first and allow him or her to suggest options.
7. I'm comfortable telling an employee exactly how his or her behavior is creating a problem, and I do so in a tactful manner.

SCORE CARD:

29 to 35: You're a wise leader who likely has little trouble gaining compliance from even the most stubborn employees.

24 to 28: You need to exercise more patience and put your personal views aside when interacting with

troublemakers on staff.

Below 23: You may be falling into the trap of allowing certain employees' negative personalities to rub off on you.

Troublesome People at Work includes:

- Specific strategies for coaching marginal workers so they can increase their productivity
- Telltale signs of workers with personal problems, and what you should and shouldn't do in response
- How to counsel rule-breakers and disruptive workers
- Special techniques for dealing with the hard cases, like sexual harassment, hostile attitudes and substance abuse on the job
- Real-life anecdotes that illustrate challenging workplace situations. You can put yourself in other managers' shoes and see how you would handle each instance
- An in-depth review of the termination process, from progressive discipline to the termination interview to proper behavior post-termination
- The importance of documenting workers' words and behaviors to keep track of them and avoid future problems

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