

# Dealing with difficult employees

All managers will have to deal with difficult employees during their careers. First, there will always be difficult employees. Second, it's your job as the manager to deal with them. If you don't deal the problem, it will only get worse.

## Why Are Difficult Employees Like That?

Difficult employees are that way simply because it is a behavior that has worked for them in the past. They may not know any other behavior or they may choose this behavior when they think it will be most effective. You will be successful in dealing with difficult employees only to the extent that you can make these undesirable behaviors no longer effective for them. In many ways, it's like dealing with children. If every time a child screams, its parents give it candy, what will the child do when it wants candy? It will scream, of course.

The same is true for the employee who "blows up" whenever anyone disagrees with him. When he does that people stop disagreeing with him and he thinks he has won.

## How Can A Manager Deal With Difficult Employees

### Evaluate

It is important when dealing with difficult employees to act quickly. Often you will need to act almost immediately to



neutralize a dangerous situation. However, it is always appropriate to think before you act. Clearly if an employee comes to work with a gun, you will need to act more quickly than when someone complains that another employee is always taking credit for her work. In either case, take the appropriate amount of 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. This can be

caused by stress on the job or away from it. Some employees are difficult more often than others. It is not always your least-productive employees who are difficult. So take a moment to evaluate each situation for the unique situation it is.

### Do your homework

Always act on facts. Don't base your actions on gossip or rumour. The person spreading the gossip is a difficult employee in his/her own way. If you have not seen

the inappropriate behaviour yourself, look into it. Ask the people reportedly involved. Collect all the facts you can before you act.

Don't use the fact that you haven't seen the inappropriate behavior as an excuse to delay doing something. It is important to act promptly.

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

### Develop a plan

You're a manager. You know the value of planning. This situation is no different. You need to plan the timing of the confrontation. You need to select a quiet, private place where you won't be interrupted. You need to decide whether you need to have others, like an HR representative, present in the meeting. Plan the confrontation and then make it happen.

When you have prepared, it is time to act. You do not need to act impulsively, but you must 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 behavior, 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, personal problems, etc.

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 behavior

As you talk with the difficult employee, actively listen to what they say. Stay calm and stay 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 back to them what they just said, "so what I understand you are saying is", so they know you are actually listening to them.

If you can find out from the difficult employee what the real source of the inappropriate behaviour is, you have a much better chance of finding a solution.

Sometimes these confrontations will go smoothly, or at least rapidly, to a conclusion. Other times it will require several sessions to resolve the problem.

### Repeat as necessary

Minor problems, like being late for work, you may be able to resolve 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. The employee may have psychological problems that require professional help, for example.

Learn when to keep trying and when to refer the employee to others for more specialized help. Your company may have an EAP or you may need to use resources from the community.

### Know when you are at the end

While the goal is always to reach a mutually acceptable solution that resolves the difficult employees inappropriate behaviour and keeps your team at full strength, sometimes that is not possible. When you reach an impasse and the employee is not willing to change his or her behaviour then 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 they also need 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.

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## Reaching your full potential: Overcoming fear

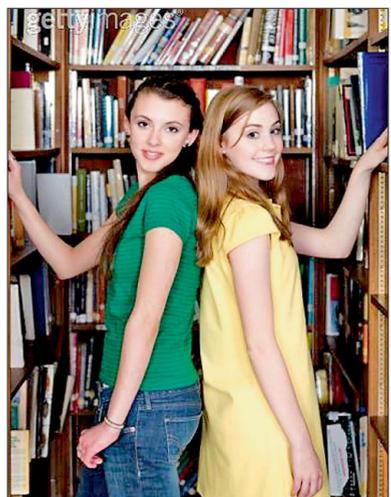
Each of us has untapped potential. When this potential is embraced and used, it can have a powerful impact on our lives.

Think about a 2%, 5%, 10% shift in how we are living our lives at home, school, work and play. Small shifts and changes can powerfully impact our lives. But what gets in our way? What obstacles must we overcome? One obstacle for people is fear, and fear can be limiting at best and paralyzing at worst.

My family and I went camping over the spring break holidays. We camped at a beautiful State Park - Falls Creek Falls -- in Tennessee. It is a wonderful place to visit and explore with breathtaking views, hiking trails, and waterfalls.

Some of the hiking trails have suspension bridges connecting the trails over vast gorges, some bridges being more than 100 ft. high. Like the one in the Indiana Jones movie. As my wife, two boys and I approached a very long bridge suspended at least 100 ft. high, my oldest son quickly took off across the bridge and yelled for the rest of us to join him.

As I approached the bridge, while he was crossing, I yelled out to him the typical parent concerns -- Be careful! Hang onto the rail! Walk slow! If the bridge breaks... What was I thinking? What was I feeling?



I became acutely aware of an enormous amount of fear for him, and fear in me while I was crossing this high bridge. When he got to the other side, he turned, waved and yelled, "Come On Dad!" I walked slowly across the bridge noticing an incredible amount of fear and runaway thinking happening with me, which had me considering not going forward. My son was on the other side and I had a choice, to let the fear stop me or not.

As I walked across the bridge the fear increased profoundly inside of me until I got to the other side. Once I was over the bridge, my son and I high-fived and walked back across the bridge. As we walked back across I experienced no fear. What happened to the fear?

That experience highlighted this point to me. That there are times in our lives when we want to do something -- be a better student, be a better parent, improve our personal or work lives, improve ourselves athletically -- but fear can creep up inside of us and we become unsure of ourselves. Unsure if we can achieve -- "getting to the other side". Most of the fear that stops us from achieving what we want or need to do to improve our lives, is nothing more than self limiting beliefs.

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