

MANAGING PROBLEM EMPLOYEES

By: Lauren M. Bernardi

Partial excerpt from the Manager's Manual section of Lauren Bernardi's book: "**Powerful Employment Policies**".¹

As an employer you have no doubt lived the 80/20 rule: 80% of your time is spent managing the 20% of your staff who are problems. These problems can range from an employee who is chronically late to one who doesn't seem to possess the skills necessary to do the job.

This article explores some of the techniques you can use to successfully manage your problem employees.

Analyzing the Problem

One of the biggest mistakes managers make is to rush to solve the problem without first determining its cause. The danger to this approach is that you will waste your time on the wrong solution.

Performance problems can have many causes, both external and internal. External causes include things like insufficient resources to do the job, poor lighting or too many distractions. Internal causes of performance problems include a lack of ability or motivation to perform the tasks of the job.

Asking yourself and your employee the following questions will assist you in fully analyzing the problem.

External Causes

1. Are expectations clear?

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to performance is expectations. Most employees want to do well; they just need to know what is expected of them so they can meet their expectations.

When it comes to expectations, managers often say, "they should know". But "should know" and "do know" are entirely different matters. For example, some organizations defend their lack of a formal, written harassment policy by saying their employees "should know" what behaviour is acceptable in the workplace.

However, in harassment awareness workshops it quickly becomes clear how little employees actually do know about harassment and how many misconceptions there are.

¹ Lauren Bernardi. "Powerful Employment Policies." Canada Law Book (2010).

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What matters is what employees believe is expected of them. You can establish your expectations about what behaviours and performance standards you expect in a number of ways, such as using:

- accurate and up-to-date job descriptions
- clear and regularly utilized performance evaluation forms
- ongoing feedback
- an employee handbook and other written communications such as internal newsletters

2. Does the employee have sufficient resources to do the job?

Sometimes the problem is as simple as a lack of resources. This can sometimes be quite easy to resolve.

For example, a medium sized company is having problems with Frank, the new receptionist. Although he has been provided with a staff directory Frank repeatedly confuses people's extensions and routes callers to the wrong person. After observing him doing his job, Frank's manager realizes that Frank is having trouble reading the directory because the print is too small. After providing Frank with a directory with a much larger font, the number of errors drops dramatically.

While this may seem like an overly simplistic example, it's not. It's like the old adage: the simplest answer is usually the right one. Look for the simple answer first.

3. Have you provided sufficient feedback?

If you want employees to repeat positive actions and change negative ones, you must provide feedback. To be effective, your feedback must be:

- immediate and ongoing
- specific: provide examples to illustrate what you mean
- manageable: limit it to several key points that the employee can absorb and act on
- understood by the employee, even if he or she disagrees with it
- focused on improvement: tell the employee exactly what needs to be done to remedy any deficiencies
- focused on the behaviour and not the person

4. Are there consequences for poor performance?

Make sure there are consequences for failing to meet your expectations.

A manufacturing organization complains that managers do not conduct staff evaluations on a timely basis. In some cases, the evaluations are more than six months overdue. When asked what the consequences are to the managers who fail to report on time, the president

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of the company says there are none. So why should the managers comply? They are already overloaded and since there are no immediate consequences for not completing the evaluations, they will not be motivated to do so.

To remedy this situation, the company included an assessment item on each manager's evaluation form that examined how timely and effectively they were completing their staff evaluations. The next year, the managers all completed the performance evaluations on time.

5. Are there negative consequences for good performance?

Sometimes employees actually experience negative consequences for doing the job well. For example, a manager might say, "since you're doing such a great job, I'm going to give you even more work to do". Unless the person is interested in extra responsibilities, performing well does not pay off and he or she will be less motivated to do so in the future.

6. Are there too many distractions?

Many people extol the virtues of an open door policy but it does have a major drawback –too many distractions. You have no doubt experienced many days when it's been impossible to concentrate or work productively because you've been inundated with phone calls, e-mail messages and interruptions by chatty co-workers.

If distractions are hampering an employee's performance, try to find a way of minimizing them. For example, set aside a sacred time each day or pick a day or days in a month when the employee can feel free to close his or her door and not take phone calls. Many people who use this kind of approach report that they can get a full day's worth of work done – and done well – in just two hours.

7. Is it really a problem or is it just something that annoys you?

Sometimes what we perceive as a problem is not a problem so much as something that annoys us. If correcting the problem will not really have a positive impact on performance or output then it may not be worth the time and energy required to correct the problem.

Internal Causes

1. Does the person lack the necessary skills?

If an employee seems to lack the skills necessary to do the job, you may want to consider training. To assess whether training would be effective, consider whether:

- the employee has the ability and motivation to acquire the skill
- it is more cost effective to modify the job slightly or change your expectations

Do not be too quick to dismiss training in the mistaken assumption that the person doesn't have what it takes to do the job. We sometimes make hasty decisions to terminate

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employees without investing the time to help them do their jobs well. Termination should be a last resort; it is expensive and unfair to a potentially good employee.

2. Could the person do the job before?

If the person is new to the job or has never been able to perform the task in question then training probably is in order. Too often employees are thrown into a new job with little or no training. This is all too true with employees who are promoted into managerial or supervisory positions without any assistance in acquiring the skills necessary to do the job. If the person could do the job before but performance has declined, there may be a number of factors at play:

- he or she may not have had enough practice
- too much time may have elapsed since the employee last performed the task and he or she has now forgotten how to do it, or
- there may be an extraneous cause such as an increase in stress either at work or at home.

Take the time necessary to determine the source of the problem before jumping to a training solution.

3. Does the employee have an attitude problem?

Attitude problems are probably the most difficult to resolve and, as you know, one person with a negative attitude can affect the entire group (wouldn't it be nice if the converse was also true?).

To offset a negative attitude bring the issue out in the open. Tell the employee why you feel his or her attitude is a problem. Then listen carefully and try to ascertain the source of the problem and, if possible, work with the employee to identify a solution.

You may also need to apply consequences, such as discipline, if the employee continues to infect the workplace.

4. Are there problems with team relations?

Don't underestimate the effect of relationships on an employee's performance. Gossip, infighting and verbal abuse can have a huge impact on a person's ability to work effectively. These kinds of problems need to be addressed openly and quickly.

Be careful not to be the kind of manager who brushes aside conflict and laments, "why can't everyone just get along?" As unpleasant as it may seem, your involvement might be necessary to overcome the challenges often faced by people when working together.

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Resolving the Problem

How you resolve a problem will depend in large part on its cause. For example, if the employee does not have the proper equipment, providing it to him or her will, in most circumstances resolve the problem. Other problems may require ongoing training and long term goal setting.

Sometimes you will find that there are several solutions to a given problem. The solution you choose will depend on a number of factors such as cost, simplicity, employee preference, effect on other staff members and even the political implications.

You will also need to determine whether the problem is a disciplinary matter or a performance management issue. A disciplinary matter relates to a rule infraction or behavioural problem such as insubordination or excessive lateness. A performance problem relates to an employee's inability to adequately perform the duties of the job.

Respond to the problem with the appropriate tool. For example, provide a warning letter if it's a disciplinary matter and identify the performance deficiency in the evaluation form if it is performance related.

Conclusion

The bulk of this article has been devoted to analyzing the problem and only a small portion to resolving it. The same should be true of your approach to handling problem employees. If you take the time to carefully analyze the cause of the problem, the solution will often be obvious and quite simple.

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Above all, we're on your side. We work with you to prevent costly problems and when litigation is necessary, we act as strong advocates to protect your interests.

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About Lauren Bernardi

Lauren is a lawyer and human resource advisor with the Mississauga firm of Bernardi Human Resource Law. Lauren's advisory, training and educational services help managers direct their human resources in a strategically sound and legally appropriate manner. She is an accomplished and entertaining speaker on management and human resource issues.

For more information, you may reach Ms. Bernardi at 905-486-1991, by e-mail at lbernardi@hrlawyers.ca or on the web at www.hrlawyers.ca.



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