

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## **Problem workers may not be the problem**

**The real issue may be the way they are managed. While it's tempting to houseclean difficult staff, you risk tossing valuable talent**

WALLACE IMMEN

September 26, 2008

Here's a quick fix for your management headaches: Give the boot to your groaners, hotheads and heel-draggers.

But if you succumb to such temptation, you'll be making the wrong move, experts say.

With such a knee-jerk housecleaning of problem employees, you can end up tossing out valuable talent that could be easily salvaged, contends Laurence Miller, author of *From Difficult to Disturbed, Understanding and Managing Dysfunctional Employees*.

Clearing out such difficult employees is certainly going to be more and more on the minds of managers looking to trim payrolls in an increasingly challenging economy, says Dr. Miller, a clinical psychologist and management consultant in Boca Raton, Fla.

"Typically, it's the weird guys and the underachievers who will be seen as most expendable if a company is making cuts," he says.

But, in reality, he argues, the real difficulty may lie not with these employees, but with the way they are being managed.

"In the vast majority of cases, management understanding and support can turn problem [employees] back into the valuable employees they were when they were hired."

Often, difficulties develop because of changes in jobs or assignments that put people in situations at odds with their underlying personalities and needs, he says.

But "a seemingly obstreperous or hopeless employee can be salvaged if you know how to play to his or her strengths, and minimize his or her interpersonal and job-related weaknesses," Dr. Miller says.

By learning how to understand and interpret different employees' personality types, managers can head off developing difficulties in stable employees as the economy heads into a downturn, he says.

"If procedures are changed or staffing is reduced to save payroll in a recession, new tasks and higher work loads will put stress on employees who were able to cope in the past. That could lead them to react in dysfunctional ways." For some, that could mean increased confrontation, while others may withdraw.

The key is to understand what situations are likely to stir different employees' difficult behaviour, and steer them clear of them, he says.

"You don't have to be a psychologist to figure this out," Mr. Miller says. "People have consistency in their behaviours and, if you can learn how to use their personalities productively, everyone gets along a lot better."

One way to gain insights: Use standardized tests of personality and emotional intelligence, says Laura Smillie, director of operations for Mississauga-based management training consultancy vpi Inc.

"Behavioural tests take the guesswork out of deciding who would be most effective and comfortable in an assignment," she says.

The tests should also be taken by managers, Ms. Smillie says, because results can point out areas of potential friction with employees with dissimilar personality traits.

She identifies four basic personality types; each, she says, has different needs a job has to fulfill to keep them motivated and onside.

**Gregarious:** These people relish personal relationships and co-operation and will rankle at decisions made without their input and at solo assignments that isolate them. To get them back on track, she suggests giving regular feedback on how their work helps the team meet its goals, and offering lots of opportunities to participate in group activities.

**Conservatives:** Detail-oriented employees who rely on policies and procedures are often also introverts. They'll become uncomfortable and anxious when faced with a job change or an unfamiliar project. They are, however, likely to thrive if given clear directions, positive feedback and encouragement about individual performance.

**Logical thinkers:** Employees constantly challenging decisions and assignments need to be given clear explanations of how they fit in to the big picture. Give them rationale for their work and allow them freedom to be creative in their problem-solving.

**Innovators:** Employees who value freedom and variety will feel stifled and become restless and moody if they are stuck in the same job month after month. Assign them

tasks with open-ended possibilities that challenge their imagination and regular opportunities to take on new roles.

Taking action to keep employees out of jobs that could lead them to become difficult can head off future problems. How best to turn around existing problem employees?

It's important that managers deal with them individually and in private, advises Beverly Benwick, Chief Executive Officer of Executive Coaching firm R.W. Benwick Associates Ltd. in Vancouver.

"Managers often resist intervening in behaviour issues and tend to think of discipline as the job of a human resources manager or an outside consultant, she says."It's a delicate business trying to tell someone when they are becoming a thorn in your side and a risk to the organization."

But a manager who knows his or her employees well is more likely to get them to open up and want to change than someone brought in from the outside, she says.

It's also important to come across as concerned but not threatening, Ms. Benwick advises. Lay out examples of how they are seen by others.

For example, say "This is what I'm seeing" and "this is how this behaviour is affecting the organization and the people you work with."

Ask for their interpretation, and listen without commenting, she recommends. They may not be seeing the behaviour in the same way and may not realize that continuing to act the same way could derail their career.

Then ask them to come up with a solution. That gets them involved and makes them more likely to feel a subsequent action was their choice, Ms. Benwick says.

Follow-up is important, so schedule a timetable of meetings over the following two to six months to discuss how an employee's behaviour is improving, she says.

Leaven these discussions with positive feedback, she advises.

"Managers who are very tough and relentlessly negative can be very wearing on employees, who will resist the constant criticism," she says.

"Constant communication and regular feedback to employees goes a long way to heading off development of behavioural problems, Mr. Miller adds.

"No matter what their personality type, most employees will co-operate and treat others with respect when they are being treated fairly and as individuals."

\*\*\*

## *Difficult dealing*

Have to play traffic cop, coach or parole officer for a difficult employee? Here are tips from clinical psychologist and management consultant Laurence Miller, author of *From Difficult to Disturbed, Understanding and Managing Dysfunctional Employees*, and Beverly Benwick, Chief Executive Officer of Executive Coaching firm R.W. Benwick Associates Ltd.:

- Keep it confidential
- Making criticism public will create embarrassment for an employee, and could invite reprisals.
- Define the problem
- Be clear and specific about the number and type of complaints, and the period of time over which they have been occurring.
- Identify the impact
- Describe the effects that the person's behaviour is having on others.
- Cite office standards
- Pointing out that there are general norms of behaviour that apply to everyone makes it clear you aren't singling someone out for personal reasons.
- Be supportive
- Sandwich criticism between praise for things the person is doing well.
- Describe corrective action
- Be clear about changes you expect to see, and how they should show up in the employee's daily behaviour.
- Ask for input
- Get employees' suggestions to make it feel as though possible solutions are their own idea.
- Define success Give concrete examples of behaviour you want to see him or her demonstrate at work.
- Consider role-playing as an aid.
- Provide motivation
- Suggest gains the employee could make in performance and personal status from behaving in recommended ways.
- Document the discussion
- Confirm in writing what was discussed and agreed upon.
- Follow up
- Set a schedule for a review of progress.

*Wallace Immen*