

First Steps In Managing A Difficult Employee



An employee who is angry, volatile or a potential threat does not belong in the workplace, but it can be difficult and in some cases potentially dangerous to fire that employee without first taking important steps to ensure you manage the situation appropriately.

If an employee has a history of substance abuse or mental health issues terminating employment can lead to legal problems for the organization but failing to protect other employees from a violent or disturbed co-worker can also lead to problems. Finding a balance between the rights of an individual employee to be accommodated and protecting the safety of other employees does not mean letting an employee put your organization or employees at risk, finding a balance means finding a way to identify a potential risk and intervene early before things escalate.

Be Prepared to Identify Difficult Employees

An employee who is difficult to get along with is difficult to get along with.

Unfortunately this can mean that people, including managers and supervisors, may avoid addressing the problem. This can let a situation build overtime to a point where intervening seems more abrupt to the difficult employee and where the situation is more difficult to scale back and manage.

One of the most important steps an organization can take to address a difficult employee problems is to arm supervisors and managers with the knowledge of how to identify employees with mental health and/or substance abuse issues, the importance of documenting their observations and evidence to support their concerns, and the skills to act effectively. The better prepared the manager is with knowledge and notes the better able you are to step into the intervention process early before a difficult employee becomes a disgruntled employee.

Train All Employees In Dealing With Difficult Employees

Awareness of how to spot and react to an employee with mental health issues is a benefit to all employees. Provide employees with Mental Health First Aid training so they are better prepared to help the organization spot an employee with mental health issues and avoid making comments or taking actions that can escalate a situation. It won't be the role of your employees to intervene, but they can help by noticing, bringing concerns to the attention of supervisors and knowing how react and step back

as needed.

Have an Intervention Process In Place

In order to intervene a manager or supervisor needs to be armed with the policies and procedures that support their actions and the skills to step in and begin the process. Useful policies and procedures should begin include steps to first work with an employee to identify any needs for accommodation and focus on offering to help an employee, even if that employee is difficult.

Once you are aware of the potential problem the first Intervention steps should include:

- **Plan it don't wing it:** enter the meeting with ideas about resources to help the employee and ideas for workplace behaviours the employee can change to improve workplace relationships. Do not start with these ideas or even fully offer them, but do think about them ahead of time.
- **Invite don't summon:** An employee who may be struggling with mental health concerns or who is volatile may also have a tendency towards paranoia and a victimization complex, when requesting a meeting invite the employee to meet with you to discuss the productivity of the team and the employees role in the productivity of the team.
- **Inquire don't accuse:** regardless of the issue, if the issue is one of work performance or inappropriate behaviour, when it is time to speak to the employee begin by asking how things are going or how the employee is feeling or has been doing. Do not begin by asking about specific performance or behaviour issues, let the employee talk without accusation.
- **Listen don't correct:** An employee with a mental health issue, who is under stress or has a personality disorder may not have the same perspective on a situation as everyone else. It is important that you provide the employee an opportunity to offer his/her perspective, even if it does not sound right, listening can go a long way to managing the initial stages of the situation.
- **Ask don't tell:** Ask the employee what types of changes would be beneficial to improve his/her performance, productivity or experience in the workplace. If the employee opens the door to discussing issues of stress, substance abuse, and depression offer to work with the employee to find resources to help him/her reduce the stresses being experienced.
- **Discuss don't dictate:** As you talk with the employee about his/her ideas offer suggestions as to what changes the employee can contribute to the workplace to help improve productivity. Provide the employee with suggestions and a plan that give the employee an opportunity to cooperate within the workplace. Part of the plan can include offering the employee a mentor or coach to help the employee 'succeed' in the future.

These first conversations can set tone for building a trusting relationship that can help a difficult employee feel heard and supported. This might not solve the problem but it may keep the problem manageable and give you time to work through the situation safely over time.