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Dealing with Problem Behaviour in the Workplace

By Megan Tough

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I personally struggle with the term "managing people", because I firmly believe that people cannot be managed - only processes and systems can. How many times have you heard it said - "Why won't my employees just do as they are asked?"

Despite all our best efforts at "managing", we have very little control over other people's actions, including the people that work with or for us. We can inspire, motivate, guide or threaten them, but the choice to act in a certain way is up to the individual.

Today's workplaces are complex environments - it is a rare occasion when all employees get on together and work enthusiastically and constructively to achieve the goals of the business. Problem behavior on the part of employees can erupt for a variety of reasons. Here are ten tips for dealing with it.

1. Recognize that problem behavior usually has a history

It usually develops over time and seldom from a single incident. As a manager, it is your responsibility to be alert to the early warning signs and deal with the underlying causes before the situation reaches a crisis.

2. Ask yourself: "Am I partly or wholly responsible?"

If the problem is in your team, then you are at least partly responsible for it. Perhaps you were blind to the signs the individual was undoubtedly leaving you, or you chose to ignore them and hope they would go away. Perhaps you hadn't been managing that individual's performance on a regular basis, and so missed an opportunity to discover the problem earlier. Whatever the reason, responsibility lies with you in some part.

You would be surprised how frequently it is the manager who has created, or at least contributed to problems of employee behavior. Having an abrasive style, being unwilling to listen, and being inattentive to the nuances of employee behavior are all factors that contribute to the manager's need to thoroughly examine what is going on.

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3. Don't focus only on the overt behavior

When confronted by an angry or upset employee, it's easy to attack the person and target their behaviour rather than examine the factors that underlie the behavior. Often, this takes patience, careful probing, and a willingness to forgo judgment until you really understand the situation.

4. Be attentive to the "awkward silence" and to what is not said

When an employee is obviously reluctant to communicate, it's almost a sure sign that more lurks beneath the surface. Often, employees will hold back because they feel unsafe. They may test the waters by airing a less severe or kindred issue in order to see what kind of a response they get. In order to get the full story and encourage forthrightness, the manager has to read between the lines and offer the concern and support necessary to get the employee to open up.

5. Clarify before your confront

Chances are, when an issue first surfaces, you will be given only a fragmentary and partial picture of the problem. You may have to dig deep to surface important facts, and talk to others who may be involved. One safe assumption is that each person will tend to present the case from his or her viewpoint, which may or may not be the way it really is. Discretion and careful fact-finding are often required to get a true picture.

6. Be willing to explore the possibility that you have contributed to the problem

This isn't easy, even if you have reason to believe it's so, because you may not be fully aware of what you have done to fuel the fire. Three helpful questions to ask yourself:

- Is this problem unique, or does it have a familiar ring as having happened before?,
- Are others in my organization exhibiting similar behaviors?, and finally,
- Am I partially the cause of the behavior I am criticizing in others?

Once you understand how you have contributed, you can decide to take action yourself to make sure it doesn't happen again.

7. Plan your strategy

Start by defining, for yourself, what changes you would like to see take place, then, follow this sequence:

Meet with the person and let them know that there is a problem.

State the problem as you understand it and explain why it is important that it be resolved

Gain agreement that you've defined the problem correctly, and that the employee understands that it must be solved

Ask for solutions, using open-ended questions such as: "What are you willing to do to correct this problem?" In some cases, you may have to make it clear what you expect

Get a dedication that the employee will take the required actions

Set deadlines for finishing the actions. In the case of a repeated problem, you may want to advise the employee of the consequences of failing to take corrective action

Follow up on the deadlines you've set

8. Treat the employee as an adult and expect adult behavior

To some extent, expectation defines the result. If you treat the employee as a naughty child, then you

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should expect a naughty child to respond. If you indicate – by your actions or by the content or tone of your voice – that you expect adult behavior, then that's what you're likely to get.

9. Treat interpersonal conflicts differently

If the problem behavior stems from a personality conflict between two employees, have each one answer these questions:

- (1) How would you describe the other person?
- (2) How does he or she make you feel?
- (3) Why do you feel that the other person behaves the way he/she does?
- (4) What might you be able to do to alleviate the situation?
- (5) What would you like the other person to do in return?

10. Gain agreement on the steps to be taken and results expected

A problem is not really "fixed" until it stays fixed. Everyone involved must agree that the steps taken (or proposed) will substantially alleviate the problem. This includes you as manager, and the steps you

personally will take to ensure you are not contributing to similar problem in the future.

Finally, agree how you will both monitor the issue. What needs to take place for you both to be satisfied that the issue has been completely resolved. Write this down and use it as your measure of success.

Megan Tough, director of Action Plus, works with small business professionals who are ready to do more than 'just get by'. Increase your income – decrease your stress! To learn more and to sign up for more FREE tips and articles like these, visit www.megantough.com

Does Genes Influence Child Behaviour?

By Melvin H. Gill

Many different things have an impact on a child's behaviour.

Genes Some children are naturally more lively and excitable than others. They may be easily distracted and enjoy company rather than spending time on their own. Although boisterous, you'll usually be able to control their behaviour.

School You may notice a change in your child's behaviour when she starts school. If your child has problems learning things or is slower in picking things up, this can affect her behaviour. Reading problems can also make it hard to complete tasks or follow instructions.

Parental behaviour Problems are a part of everyday life, but if you are unhappy and absorbed in dealing with them, it will affect the time you spend with your child. To counter this, your child may try to attract attention through noisy behaviour.

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If it isn't clear to your child what is and isn't allowed, it can result in difficult behaviour. This is because rules let your child know you don't like a certain type of conduct.

Clear, consistent rules will help your child learn to control her own behaviour. So if you're a two-parent family, you and your partner need to agree on the boundaries.

If you're a working parent, it's also something that needs discussing with your child's carers. Sensitivity to food or medicine.

There's no doubt food can affect the way we feel. You may notice certain foods affect your child's behaviour. If you're concerned about your child's diet, you should ask your GP or a dietician for advice. All children need a healthy balanced diet. Medicines can also affect the behaviour of some children.

Some asthma medications may sometimes make a child hyperactive, irritable or unable to sleep for a short time. Travel sickness medicines and antihistamines have the potential to make children either drowsy or overactive. Children may feel irritable following vaccines or if a medicine has caused a headache. If you think any medicine is making your child behave differently, talk to your GP. It may be that your child's behaviour is unrelated to the medicine, but if it is, your GP may be able to suggest an alternative treatment.

Medical problems Certain medical conditions can affect your child's behaviour. Epileptic seizures can cause a child to become drowsy, impairing their attention. Epilepsy can also cause unusual behaviour and lead to abnormal perceptions.

Hearing problems such as deafness or glue ear can make it hard for a child to follow instructions. Sometimes, not hearing what's been said can be mistaken for not doing what you're told.

How to foster good Child Behaviour at



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