

## Overcoming the underperformer

How to cope with the tardy, the lazy, gossips and back-talkers in the workplace

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Managers hate them. Co-workers tolerate them. Difficult employees. They gossip. Miss deadlines. Back-talk. Surf the Web. So what can be done to make them toe the line?

"Three strikes and you're out," said Steve Elliott, manager of Allied Wholesale Electrical Supply Inc. in Anderson. "If you let a person like that stay around, he will rub off on other people. The next thing you know, you don't just have one difficult employee, you have two, three, four or five of them."

Nationwide, about 10 percent of the work force falls into the low-performing or difficult category, according to Studer Group, an executive coaching firm in Gulf Breeze, Fla., which works with more than 400 companies nationwide.

That can mean someone who has no clue how to do his job or who is completely qualified but needs an attitude adjustment. Often, managers can't put their finger on what the problem is.

"Low performers stay in power with vagueness," said Quint Studer, chief executive officer of Studer Group. "They have survivor skills that most of us haven't even thought of."

After sitting down with a troublesome employee, an exhausted manager may end up convinced that she is the problem. "Low performers will suck the energy right out of all of us," Studer said.



Roche Diagnostics managers or soon-to-be managers (from left) Keith Christie, Jim Bogner and Kenyada Griffin work as a team to assemble a puzzle. One sorts pieces, one frames the puzzle and the builder (Christie, with gloves) assembles it. -- Matt Kryger / The Star

### STAYING IN CONTROL

Tips for managing difficult employees:

- Make clear what is expected from them.
- Set deadlines.
- Outline consequences.
- Hold them accountable.
- Have a peer hold them accountable.
- Communicate often and immediately when something is wrong.
- Criticize softly and behind closed doors.
- When they do something well, praise them in front of others.
- Remember they are people first and employees second. Try to understand why they keep making mistakes.
- Don't let them drag down high-performing employees.

Source: Star research

Companies increasingly are implementing training and leadership classes to teach new managers and veteran leaders how to handle any back-talking, incompetent employee who might land on their team.

It's not that bad behavior is on the rise in the workplace, rather that companies are taking a more progressive, systematic approach to handling it, Studer said. Roche Diagnostics last month was recognized by Fortune magazine as one of the 100 best companies for which to work in the United States. One reason it made the prestigious list was its management-training program.

It's a continuing process that teaches managers philosophical strategies, communication methods and ways to make employees *want* to please them. Leaders learn listening skills and ways to adjust management styles to fit workers' personalities.

### **Role-playing**

Last week, managers at Roche gathered for a session that included role-playing. Wendy Baker-Stein, the company's director of marketing operations for centralized diagnostics, said she learned to deal with difficult workers by having face-to-face, open dialogue.

She also finds dealing with problems quickly means speedier resolutions. "Do real-time coaching," said Baker-Stein, who has been managing people for 10 years and currently oversees nine workers, two of whom are managers themselves. "Don't let things get to a point where you've got an issue."

If somebody's late, and it's the first time, Baker-Stein said she wouldn't address it. If the person is late a second time, she suggests calling the worker into the office as soon as he or she walks in the door.

Experts say tardiness is a fairly easy behavioral problem to address because it is measurable. Simply tell the employee she will be fired if she is late more than 10 times, or whatever number seems appropriate.

Other behavioral problems, such as gossiping, are more difficult to overcome. Elliott, the electrical supply manager, said gossip was at the heart of one of his worst management challenges. The employee not only gossiped among his co-workers but constantly badmouthed Elliott himself.

At one point, the worker went to Elliott's boss and accused Elliott of some "pretty bad stuff." Luckily for Elliott, his boss didn't believe it, and the two agreed the employee should be fired.

If you have a gossip, there are other ways to deal with it. But ignoring it is not an option, said Joan Lloyd, a leadership management guru. "It will continue to simmer until it bubbles over and creates a bigger mess to clean up," she said.

Lloyd said managers must try to catch the gossip in the act rather than relying on tattling from co-workers. Then Lloyd suggests implementing a method called contracting, in which the gossip is asked to write down what she will do to fix her behavior. This lets the worker set some rules, while the manager adds a few of her own. The new expected behavior is in writing and consequences are attached.

Another touchy situation is the back-talking employee. After a manager has given the worker three warnings about his sassy mouth, it is time for a facilitator or mediator.

This outside person probably will be more effective at getting through to the employee.

Experts also suggest tape-recording the employee so he can hear what he sounds like. It's possible the employee is not aware the attitude is so bad.

Other workers are likely quite aware of their behavioral problems but need a nudge. Like those who talk on the phone too much or surf the Web the entire day.

Experts say managers should have workers keep logs of their own days so they will realize just how much time they spend on nonwork activities.

"You can't fall in the trap of being nice," Studer said. "You have to tell the worker they need to move the performance up or move out."

### **No micromanaging**

Try to avoid a situation in which the manager must constantly monitor the employee.

That's called micromanaging, and as tough as it may be to keep those tendencies inside, leaders must do so, said Harry E. Chambers, the author of "My Way or the Highway: The Micromanagement Survival Guide."

Instead of addressing the employee's flaws, it likely will cause them to multiply. Bill Kuntz doesn't think the word "manager" should even be in the workplace vocabulary. "Do you want to be managed, or do you want to be led?" asks Kuntz, the managing partner at Princeton Search Group, a recruitment firm near Keystone at the Crossing. "I want somebody that's going to raise me up, not manage me."

### **Looking for the good**

Kuntz oversees 61 employees and has a clear style for handling any type of employee, but especially the ones who may give their bosses a little extra trouble.

"We don't want to catch them doing things wrong. We want to catch them doing things right," said Kuntz. When he does, he praises them. "Who gets tired of that? Has anyone ever been praised too much?" he said. "Praise loudly and praise in front of people. Criticize softly, and directly to the person."

There are employee behavior problems not solved by praise and rewards. That's when a management adjustment must take place. Some employees need a tougher style of managing that includes goal-setting, close monitoring and weekly checkups with consequences for failure.

Expectations must be made clear from the start of the employer/employee relationship, said Scott Love, a leadership speaker based in Asheville, N.C. That way, there is a measurement system in place and hopefully a way to inspire employees to do good work.

Another powerful tool to prompt an underperformer is teaming him or her with a co-worker who will be held accountable for a low performer's output.

"Peer pressure, of course, is the most effective way to get something done," Love said.

But when it doesn't get done, when the employee continues to wear jeans instead of suits, when she chomps gum on the phone or talks back, when he's just plain difficult, how do you know it's time to fire him?

"That's the question everybody wants to know the answer to," Love said. Call Star reporter Dana Knight at (317) 444-6012.