

Managing difficult employees

The majority of your employees will present you with very few issues during their time with your company (aside from the odd questionable sick day or occasional hissy fit). These employees will quietly beaver away and perform admirably with the minimum of fuss. Heck, they may even be quite likeable. However, every now and then you will come up against an employee who always seems at their happiest when they're pulling in the opposite direction to everyone else. You know, the kind of employee who never quite performs to their potential, struggles to get along with any of their colleagues and never expels an ounce of effort more than they absolutely have to. They break rules, are argumentative and sometimes even downright rude.

This chapter is about those employees and how to manage them without resorting to violence.

These difficult employees, aside from the obvious problems they create, are also thieves of time. Their actions mean that managers have to spend an inordinate amount of hours dealing with performance issues, moans, gripes and disputes – valuable time that could be better spent elsewhere. So, when faced with a difficult employee, what can we do to avoid being drawn into an endless cycle of frustration and squandered hours?

Read on and you might just find out.

Useful Quotes

"It is very, very hard to get ahead without being a positive person because, very simply, no one likes to work under or near a dark cloud. Even if the cloud is very smart."– Jack Welch

Don't Ignore the Problem – Dealing with difficult employees is difficult in itself. It involves confrontation, criticism and can be mentally exhausting if you've never had to do it before. Even the most experienced of man managers won't put 'dealing with awkward staff' at the top of their list of favourite tasks but ignore the problem at your peril. Brushing it under the carpet will not make it go away. In fact, chances are that if you fail to tackle the problem head on it will grow into a far bigger beast, then you'll have to deal with it anyway. You shouldn't underestimate the negative effects that a difficult employee can have on your business. Take a deep breath, stick the theme from Rocky on your iPod and get yourself in the zone.

Open Your Ears – The chances are that the only reason you are aware that you have a difficult employee is through negative feedback from their managers or colleagues. Beware of 'The Grapevine' as the things heard on it are often biased due to personal opinion. Speak with the employee in question and try to get to the root of why they are acting the way they are.

Top Tip

The best chance you have of improving the situation is through a thorough understanding of it and this can only be obtained through direct communication with the person in question. Taking the time to sit down and chat with the employee may uncover other underlying problems within the business that you were not aware of. Maybe they have issues outside of work that are affecting their attitude. It could be that there are personal conflicts between them and their co-workers or they may not get along with their boss. There may be other issues out of their control which are stopping them from performing their job effectively. You won't know until you ask so make this your first step toward solving the problem.

Be Clear – If you have established that the employee is being difficult of their own volition then it's time to 'lay down the law', but be constructive. Tell them why their behaviour is unacceptable. Detail the negative effects that they are having on the people around them and the business as a whole, as well as their own career. It's at this point that you should set out exactly what you expect them to do to turn things around. Be as specific as you can on the steps that they need to take and the implications for them should they fail to improve.

Stick to the Procedure – The type of difficult employee that regularly locks horns with their peers or managers is the same type of employee that will most likely take you to tribunal if things go pear shaped. For this reason it is absolutely vital that you stick to your company's procedures should things start to get formal.

Document, Document, Document – This is probably the single most important step when dealing with a difficult employee.