



## HANDLING DIFFICULT EMPLOYEES EFFECTIVELY



**This issue of HR Connect is intended to help those in leadership positions:**

- Identify the effect difficult employees have on the workplace.
- Understand problem behavior and attitudes better.
- Manage difficult employees more effectively.

### 1. You Can't Afford to Ignore Problems Caused by Difficult Employees

- When confronted by workers who are difficult to deal with, your inclination may be to have as little to do with them as possible.
  - But you can't afford to do that because the influence of these employees is frequently too destructive and can negatively affect your other employees, your parish or school operation, and interactions with departments.
- Difficult employees might, for example:
    - Create hostile work relationships with co-workers and employees in other departments because they are arrogant, uncooperative, demanding, unreliable, etc.
    - Spread negativity about plans, projects, policies, changes, new approaches, and so on.
    - Undermine your authority by ignoring or bending rules.
    - Say one thing to your face and do the opposite behind your back.
    - Drag their feet and make excuses for not following instructions, meeting deadlines, etc.
    - Blame others for their failure to achieve results.
    - Complain about everything (nothing satisfies them) and try to get others to complain, too.
    - Gossip about co-workers, back stab, and spread rumors that arouse fear and dissension.
    - Gloat about their successes and point out co-workers' mistakes, failures, and problems.
    - Thwart team efforts and fail to do their share of the work.
    - Waste their time on perfectionism or unimportant details, or waste co-workers' time arguing, nitpicking, or engaging in other annoying and unproductive behavior.
  - Over time, one difficult employee can do a lot of damage to morale, interfere with productivity, create tension and stress, and spoil an otherwise comfortable work environment.
- ### 2. You Have to Understand Problem Behavior and Attitudes Before You Can Fix Them
- Base your judgments about the employee and the problems on facts, not feelings.
  - Make sure there really is a problem - for example, occasional complaints don't make a chronic complainer, and one argument doesn't make an aggressive person.



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- Understand why an employee questions an instruction or procedure.
- Remember that these employees often have good qualities as well and can be intelligent, highly skilled, and unusually knowledgeable.
  - With some work, you could turn a difficult worker into a valuable employee.
- Before you confront the employee, monitor and document difficult behavior and attitudes so that you fully understand the scope of the problem.
  - Focus on specific work-related behavior and attitudes, not on personality issues.
- Follow established procedures when investigating problem behavior that might involve legal issues - for example, sexual harassment or discriminatory activity.



### 3. Take Steps to Manage These Employees Effectively

- Meet with the employee privately; never confront a difficult employee publicly.
  - Embarrassing a worker is unprofessional and is likely to make things worse.
- Try to remain calm and professional in all interactions with difficult employees, no matter how frustrated, annoyed, or provoked you may feel.
  - Try to look beyond the difficult personality and focus solely on work performance.
- Explain your concerns in work-related terms, avoiding personal criticism.
  - Stick to the facts and give specific examples of problem behavior or attitudes.
- Identify appropriate replacement behavior and attitudes.
- Give the employee the opportunity to respond and present his or her side of the story.
  - It's possible the employee simply doesn't realize the effect of his or her behavior.
  - Listen without comment while the employee talks.
- Agree on a plan to improve behavior and set a timetable for improvement.
- Make sure the employee understands what you expect.
  - Clearly explain the standards of performance the employee is expected to meet and the consequences for failing to meet required standards.

### 4. Continue to Monitor Performance to Make Sure Problems Are Resolved

- Follow up to make sure the employee has heard you and is, in fact, improving.
- Meet with the employee on a scheduled basis for several months to discuss progress.
  - Problem behavior and attitudes are not easy to change; it takes time and effort.
- Provide positive feedback for appropriate performance and corrective feedback for inappropriate behavior or attitudes.
  - Try to "catch" these employees performing well and praise them liberally when they do.
- If things don't improve and/or a serious problem arises, documentation should follow. Documentation guidelines are outlined in **HR Connect** Issue #42.
- An important caveat: Documentation is ordinarily a necessary but not sufficient precondition for termination. If you need to terminate an employee, please review Archdiocesan guidelines and be sure to consult with and get recommendation from the Archdiocesan HR Office and Legal Office.

This article is taken from Business & Legal Report's 10-Minute HR Trainer, Trainer Outline 685 and adapted by the Office of Human Resources, Archdiocese of San Francisco.