

Q & A

Working with a Difficult Employee

Q – Dear Crucial Skills,

When I recently assumed my current job, I "inherited" an employee who has a long history of bad behavior such as being rude, stirring up trouble, and refusing to work with coworkers as a team player. How do I confront this person when the whole department has played into his behavior for years?

Inherited Employee

A – Dear Inherited,

"Inheriting" an employee with a history of bad behavior is a concern for any leader. I strongly recommend your first conversation with this employee not be a "shake-down" or a "you'd better be careful cuz I'm watching you!" speech. Rather, you ought to extend a sincere handshake followed by friendly introductions.

The next step is orienting your employees to your leadership style and expectations. Even before exploring specific duties or concerns, explain the operating values and principles of your team and your expectations of team members. It's best if this is a collaborative process involving the entire team, but at a minimum, everyone needs to be clear about the team values and operating principles. Explain that employees are not only responsible to produce results but are also responsible to produce results in a way that strengthens the team in the process. Give specific examples of what is acceptable behavior and what is out of bounds. This kind of orientation with your team sets clear expectations and gives everyone a chance for a new start— independent from past patterns and personality conflicts.

Your next leader-role with the team is teacher and coach. This requires gathering data through contact and observation, especially with the employee you have concerns about. Over the next few days, catch the employee, in the moment, doing things right. Acknowledge when his behavior approximates an important team value or principle and thank him. For example, you might say:

"Hey, Brent, I noticed in the team meeting when Alice asked for ideas about her project, you gave several helpful suggestions. That is a great example of our team value of collaboration. Your input helped Alice and helped to build a stronger team. Thank you."

Similarly, when you see behavior that violates the team's values, confront it as soon as is reasonably possible. Do this by first describing the gap by factually detailing what happened compared with what is expected. Next, ask why it happened this way. You could say:

"Brent, I noticed that when Jerry presented his proposal, you said his plan was 'idiotic' and asked him if he had ever heard of 'professional standards' before. One of our team principles is to treat each other with respect. Your comment was clearly disrespectful. Why did you say that?"



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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If he responds that he didn't realize his comment was disrespectful, take the opportunity to define more precisely what is meant by the value of respect.

If he replies that it's no big deal, then you have the opportunity to teach consequences and make the invisible visible. It could be that one reason for his past friction with employees is that no one helped him understand the negative, natural consequences his behavior had on others.

If he replies that he knows he shouldn't do that, but can't help himself, it becomes an opportunity to teach him the skills to start with heart or master his stories.

After each conversation, move to action. Get a clear and specific commitment from him about who will do what by when, and then follow-up on that commitment.

Clear expectations, as well as frequent and immediate praise and confrontation, are your best chance to help someone work well with others in a new setting.

Of course, this approach requires patience and persistence, and you must always give people the opportunity and the help they may need to improve. However, if over time, he does not comply and his poor behavior continues, make sure he understands that following the team principles and values is not a suggestion, it's a requirement of his job.

At this point, it's time to move from helping him understand the natural consequences of bad behavior to the consequences you will impose on him if he doesn't comply. Clarify that the consequences of not working within the team standards are the steps of discipline identified by the organization, even including termination. Make sure he understands that failure to comply with your requirements around teamwork will result in you applying the steps of discipline. Moving this far is very serious and will most likely damage your working relationship with him, but at some point, his failure to abide by the team's standards is a detriment both to the results you're after as a leader and your other team members' quality of life. Choosing what's best for the team is more important than trying to preserve a troubled relationship.

My experience has been that this approach helps most employees—even those with a history of bad behavior—to improve their behavior and relationships with others. It also improves the team's results. Please keep in mind this approach does not guarantee the changes in others you desire; it's not a way of controlling others; it's not a trick for manipulating others. This is a way to respectfully help individuals choose to be successful. Ultimately, it's the individual's choice whether or not to be a part of the enterprise you lead, and that's as it should be.

All the Best,
Ron