

# Dealing with poor performers and are they really that way?

By Paul J. Sullivan

Dealing with the problem employee is one of the most frustrating and time-consuming functions of being a manager. You know who they are. They come to work late, take long lunches, visit around the office, and spend lots of personal time on the phone.

They try to minimize their workload by pushing it off on others. When confronted about their behavior they get defensive, don't seem to understand what the problem is and even though they promise to do better, they eventually fall back into the same old patterns.

How you deal with the problem really depends on what stage you are in. If the employee is exhibiting this behavior and has never been approached about it, then the fact there have been no negative consequences is why this behavior continues. Wishing the employee will conform to your expectations is not a solution to the problem. Likewise, ignoring the problem and hoping it will get better is worse. The only way to deal with this behavior is to confront the employee directly.

I'm continually amazed that lawyers who are trained to be adversarial run the opposite direction when it comes to dealing with problem employees. When confronting the employee, the best approach is to list out on a piece of paper all the things the employee is doing that frustrates you. Then list what your expectations are. Here's an example—If the employee is continually late for work, then you state they are usually late for work. Your expectations are that they arrive at a specific time, and leave at a specific time. Both you and the employee should sign off on the document and place it in their personnel folder. Doing it this way leaves no room for misinterpretation.

This then brings you to stage two. If the employee continues the behavior, you have another meeting and restate your frustrations and expectations—once again in writing. This time, however, you add consequences to their continued behavior. The consequences can range anywhere from demotion to a lesser position, or elimination of consideration for promotion or raise. You may even want to inform them that continued behavior will result in them losing their job. Once again, having them sign off on the document leaves no doubt that the consequences will

occur if they don't change their ways.

Stage three, if it becomes necessary, is the level when you enforce the consequences laid out in stage two. If dismissal was not one of the consequences, then now is the time to bring it into the discussion. At some point in time you have no choice but to terminate an employee who does not follow your expectations.

Following are some simple rules in dealing with these types of employees:

1. Don't ignore a poor performer by generalizing performance among all employees. An example would be to send a memo to all employees indicating that there seems to be a slippage in arriving to work on time. Deal directly with the offenders.
2. Don't chase a poor performer. Escalate the consequences for continued poor behavior.
3. Don't tolerate up and down performance. If someone improves for awhile but falls back into their old habits, set the consequences at a higher level right away.
4. Don't reward poor performance by giving their work to others just so you can get it done.

There is no doubt the type of employee above is a problem one, but there's more to this topic that needs exploring. In most cases, employees are dedicated, honest, loyal, and hard working. Sometimes even these employees seem to "self destruct" in a manager's eyes. It seems everything they do isn't the way you want it, mis-

takes seem to magnify, and you and the employee are just downright frustrated with each other.

This may be enlightening to some, but have you ever considered that in these instances the problem may be you?

Paying someone a wage for doing a job isn't merely enough. The really good employees thrive on being able to make a difference. Knowing they are an important part of an overall team effort is many times more gratifying to these employees than earning the dollars you pay them. Having increased responsibility gives them a sense of self-worth and importance. They become more dedicated, more loyal, and more willing to go the extra mile when asked, than if they are considered just another disposable tool that can be replaced at any time.

Following is a list of key frustrations I have gathered from staff members over the years in their dealings with attorneys and managers:

1. Failing to recognize that employees have personal lives too.
2. Leaving a rush project until the last moment, which makes the deadline everyone else's problem, and then leaving the office.
3. Being consistently late for meetings, hearings, depositions, etc., and always asking the employee to make up excuses.
4. Being made to feel inferior by not considering employee's ideas or suggestions.
5. Receiving feedback when something is wrong—but never when something is right.
6. Installing new technology without consulting the people who use it.
7. Expecting the employee to read your mind—no communication, but lots of criticism if the employee guesses wrong.
8. Not taking the time to learn how to use the technology you have.
9. Revisions, revisions, revisions. Final revision was right back where we started.
10. Failing to communicate necessary information, particularly to an assistant or secretary about daily tasks, scheduling, assignments, etc., etc.

Getting positive employee performance is the most demanding part of any manager's job. Just ask anyone who is in business where their biggest headaches occur and they'll tell you dealing with employees and their problems. Granted, there are some who work just for the check and have no dedication to the organization, but that's the 20 in the 80/20 theory. It's the 80 percent who are willing to go the extra mile and who are dedicated to your success. Positive performance within both groups requires some adjustment from time to time on everyone's part. Take a look at your office. If you have a poor performer, now's the time to deal with them. If you have a valuable one, let them know how much you appreciate them, and review your attitudes and performance so you can continue to work as an effective and efficient team.