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Paper-HC-02

Topic—How to manage a toxic employee?

There's that one person on your team — the bad apple who has nothing positive to say, riles up other team members, and makes work life miserable. If you can't fire him, how do you respond to his behavior? What feedback do you give? How do you mitigate the damage he inflicts?

What the Experts Say

There's a difference between a difficult employee and a toxic one, says Dylan Minor, an assistant professor at the Kellogg School of Management who studies this topic. "I call them toxic because not only do they cause harm but they also spread their behavior to others," she explains. "There's a pattern of de-energizing, frustrating or putting down teammates," adds Christine Porath, an associate professor at Georgetown and the author of *Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace*. "It's not just that Joe is rude. The whole team suffers because of it." Of course, your first step as a manager should be to avoid hiring toxic people in the first place, but once they're on your team, it can be hard to get rid of them. "Oftentimes the behavior doesn't run against anything legal so you can't fire them if others in the organization don't agree that a line has been crossed," Porath explains. Here's what to do instead.

Dig deeper

The first step is to take a closer look at the behavior and what's causing it. Is the person unhappy in the job? Struggling in their personal life? Frustrated with coworkers? "You might meet with them and ask how they're doing — at work, at home, and with their career development," suggests Porath. If you find there's a reason for why they're acting the way they are, offer to help. "A manager can use this information to coach the person, or suggest resources to help address the root of the problem." For example, adds Minor, if the person is going through a divorce or struggling with a mental health issue, you could offer "counseling resources or time off that could potentially alleviate" the underlying issue.

Give them direct feedback

In many cases, toxic people are oblivious to the effect they have on others. "Most of the time people don't realize that they're as destructive as they are," Porath says. "They're too focused on their own behaviors and needs to be aware of the broader impact." That's why it's crucial to give direct and honest feedback — so they understand the problem and have an opportunity to change. The standard feedback rules apply: Objectively explain the behavior and its effects, using specific, concrete examples. "It's not helpful to say, 'You're annoying us all,'" Porath explains. "You have to ground it in the work." Also discuss what kind of behavior you'd like to see instead and develop an improvement plan with the employee. "What do you expect them to change? Strive for clearly defined, measurable goals," Porath says. "You're giving them the chance to have a more positive impact on people."

Explain the consequences

If the carrot doesn't work, you can also try the stick. "We all tend to respond more strongly to

potential losses than we do to potential gains, so it's important to show offenders what they stand to lose if they don't improve," says Porath. If the person is hesitant to reform, figure out what they care most about — the privilege of working from home, their bonus—and put that at stake. For most people, the possibility of missing out on a promised promotion or suffering other consequences “tied to the pocketbook” will be a strong motivation to behave in a more civil way.

Accept that some people won't change

Of course, you should always hope that the person can change but not everyone will respond to the tactics listed above. Minor is currently researching toxic doctors and says that early results indicate that some are either unable or unwilling to change. Porath's research on incivility has meanwhile found that “4% of people engage in this kind of behavior just because it's fun and they believe they can get away with it.” In those extreme cases, you should recognize that you won't be able to fix the problem and begin to explore more serious responses.

Document everything

If you conclude that you really need to fire the person, you must first document their offenses and any response you've offered so far. “You want to establish a pattern of behavior, the steps you took to address it, the information, warnings or resources provided to the employee, and the failure of the employee to change,” Porath says. Include “supporting material” too: formal complaints, relevant information from performance evaluations, such as 360-degree or peer reviews. The idea, says Minor, is to protect yourself and the company and to show your employee exactly why they are being let go.

Separate the toxic person from other team members

Even if you can't get rid of a bad apple, you can isolate it from the rest of the bushel so the rot doesn't spread. Minor's research shows that people close to a toxic employee are more likely to become toxic themselves, but the good news is that the risk also subsides quickly,” he says. As soon as you put some physical distance between the offender and the rest of the team – for example, by rearranging desks, reassigning projects, scheduling fewer all-hands meetings, or encouraging more work-from-home days — you'll see the situation start to improve. Porath calls this “immunizing” the others. “You're trying to protect people like you would with a disease,” she says. “You will hopefully decrease the number of run-ins and the cognitive loss.” But make sure to do this with discretion. Let employees come to you with their complaints about the toxic colleague and use “one-on-one conversations” to coach them on how they might minimize their interactions.”

Don't get distracted

Managing a toxic person can eat up your time, energy, and productivity. But “don't spend so much on one individual that your other priorities fall by the wayside,” says Porath. To counteract the negativity and make sure you're still thriving, “surround yourself with supportive, positive people” and “look for meaning and purpose in your work,” she says. Also focus on basic self-care. “If someone is draining you, build yourself up by exercising, eating right, sleeping, and taking breaks, both short-term ones and vacations,” she says. “Being healthy and proactive is the one thing we know that buffers people from the effects of toxic behavior.”

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Talk to the person to try to understand what's causing the behavior.
- Give concrete, specific feedback and offer the opportunity to change.
- Look for ways to minimize interactions between the toxic employee and the rest of your team.

Don't:

- Bring the situation up with your other team members. Allow them to mention it first and then provide suggestions.
- Try to fire the person unless you've documented the behavior, its impact, and your response.
- Get so wrapped up in handling the issue that you ignore more important work and responsibilities.