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Human Resources

## How to handle an employee with problem behaviour

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Tyler refuses to submit weekly progress reports, assuring you he'll "get the project done on time." Mindy gets in after 9 most mornings, and often cuts out early. Kevin frequently chit-chats about his after-work activities with co-workers, loud enough for everyone to hear. Dana always "forgets" to fill out her time card. Chris texts during meetings and regularly takes personal phone calls at work.

You've got an employee who seems smart and capable, and generally does a great job with the tasks you assign them. But even though you feel you've given them plenty of guidance and leadership, they still aren't doing things the way you want them to. How do you handle an employee when their work is good, but their behaviour is a problem?

David Zweig, associate professor of organizational behaviour at the University of Toronto Scarborough, says the first step in dealing with problem behaviour is to determine why it's happening.

“The challenge of a leader is to find out what is motivating this negative behaviour, or lack of behaviour, and get to the bottom of that,” he says. “You really need to sit down with someone and say, 'What's the issue? Explain to me what's going on. Why is it you're having difficulties with these aspects of your job and what can we do to resolve the situation?’”

Although irritating habits might make you think someone is being defiant or lazy or just has a bad attitude, something else might be at play, says Cissy Pau, principal consultant for Vancouver's Clear HR Consulting.

“Sometimes it could be a generational thing – if this is someone who's new to the workforce, or just out of school, they may need more explanation of what it's like in the work world,” she says. “A lot of times it has to do with communication, the explanation of what's important – here are the tasks you need to perform, but also how you need to perform them.”

Ms. Pau points out that sometimes the bad behaviour could have been picked up from others in the office environment, perhaps even the boss.

“If you are saying to employees, 'You've got to be on time to meetings, and don't be texting or tweeting,' but then the manager that's leading the meeting takes a phone call, you're setting the example that it's okay,” she says. “Look at yourself, what are you doing or not doing that's contributing to the behaviour?”

Employees could have personal reasons for things such as lateness or leaving early, says Toronto-based HR consultant Sari Friedman.

“Find out what's behind this need to leave,” she says. “Maybe they have to take their ailing parent for a treatment, or it's because of something they are passionate about that isn't work, like they teach spinning class.”

Both Ms. Pau and Ms. Friedman agree the key to keeping bad habits in check is regular, consistent feedback – not just a once-a-year performance review.

“If a person came late for a meeting, tell them today, don't wait for two weeks,” says Ms. Pau. “Give them specific examples, convey the consequences of what impact the behaviour has on co-workers, the project, the client,” she said.

“It's not realistic that every work relationship is going to come easily,” says Ms. Friedman. “I have a lot of managers who say, 'That's going to take a lot of my time.' But I have to remind them that's why you're called manager, that's what a lot of your time is going to be taken up by. You're not meant to be the 'do-er' 100 per cent of the time; at least 20 per cent of the time you've got to be managing people and that means talking to them and giving them feedback in a timely way.”

Ms. Friedman also warns against the “off-the-cuff” admonishment.

“If they're leaving early and you say, 'Oh, big date tonight?' – you think you've told them that it bothers you, but you haven't,” she says. “So how seriously have you conveyed that message? You can't expect that they know what you're talking about.”

But if you've determined what's behind the behaviour, given the employee direct feedback and the behaviour stills persists, the question becomes – what can you do to change that behaviour? Is it better to take the carrot or the stick approach?

“Definitely carrot,” says Mr. Zweig. “We know from research that punishment doesn't often work. The problem with the stick is if you're not there to apply the stick, the person is going to revert back to their old habits. And they're also going to blame you for using the stick. When you use punishment, you're teaching them what they're not supposed to do, but you're not teaching them what they're supposed to do. The carrot takes a little longer, but it's much more effective in producing long-term behaviour change.”

Mr. Zweig believes the easiest incentive you can use is simple praise: “Praise is a very effective and underused motivator.”

Ms. Pau suggests that incentives can also be used to encourage good performance. “You pay a person a wage to do a job and if they do their job, they get the wage,” she says. “But if you want someone to do something above and beyond, if you want them to stretch a little bit, that's when you can incent them. That value differs from person to person – it might be money for one, time off for another, a trip to Hawaii to another.”

You can also use performance objectives to communicate to your employee that their bad behaviour might affect advancement, perks and remuneration, suggests Ms. Friedman.

“If you tie it to performance and are doing reviews properly throughout the year, not just a one-hit wonder at the end, you can say ‘You're not trending well in this area, you have been coming late, leaving early, you're only getting 6 per cent on that and not 10 per cent and that affects your bonus,’” she says.

If an employee's behaviour is affecting your bottom line or company morale, that's when it's time to consider termination, says Ms. Pau.

“For example, we have a client who said, ‘We have employees who don't fill out time sheets,’ she says. “They're a service company, so the company bills their clients based on the hours employees work. If it's the only way you can invoice a client, at some point it's a really big issue.”

“If you've given the explanation, you've set up the expectations, you've given them feedback, you've given them a reward or the discipline and it doesn't work and you don't see a way out, then maybe that person doesn't fit,” says Ms. Pau.

On the other hand, says Ms. Friedman, it could be that the employee's strengths outweigh the behavioural weaknesses.

“Sometimes you'll say, ‘This person's worth it, they're quirky, they're creative,’ she said. “I also think that you have to pick and choose – you're not going to be able to change everything about everyone ...You decide which things you can more casually approach and which you need to put your foot down about. There's something about everyone that might not be ideal in a business context, so are you maximizing the good stuff?”

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