Supervising other people is never easy, but some employees make it particularly difficult. These challenging employees can try your patience and drain a lot of your time and energy. In this issue of Frontline Supervision you’ll get some practical—and personally challenging—advice on how to effectively manage problem employees.

Turning challenging employees into champion performers takes skillful management and patience. And it all begins with a look in the mirror.

Start with Yourself

If you are having problems with one or more employees, the first step is to put your own feelings and actions under the microscope. Begin by examining your feelings about a difficult employee. These questions may help:

- Are you feeling angry at the employee?
- Are you discouraged by the situation?
- Would you like to get back at the employee for all the trouble he or she has caused you?

It’s OK to be completely honest with yourself. Nobody else has to know. But you do need to understand your real feelings toward this employee so that you can control them. Otherwise, they may sneak out in ways you could regret—and that could lead to rash actions that end up in lawsuits.

You also need to assess your actions. Decide if you might have played a role in creating the difficulty. Ask yourself these types of pointed questions:

- Have you been butting heads with this employee?
- Have you let the worker get away with unacceptable behavior just because it was the easy way out?
- Have you ignored performance or other problems?

When dealing with a challenging employee, make sure that your judgments about this person are objective. For example:

- Are you evaluating this employee’s performance and behavior based on documented, verifiable facts and not unmeasurable, subjective criteria?
- Are your judgments clouded by whether you personally like or dislike the employee?
- Are you remaining professional in your assessment and approaching the situation as an impartial lawyer or jury might?

Use these self-evaluations to help you keep your emotions in check when dealing with difficult employees. No matter how frustrated you may feel, remember your position and your professional responsibilities. Before interacting with difficult employees, you may need to take a few deep breaths or remind yourself that you are responsible for managing all your employees, the easy ones and the hard ones.

The bottom line is that if you are able to manage your own behavior in a positive and professional way, you will have a much easier time managing a difficult employee’s behavior.

Tip

- Always respond positively and fairly to problem employees. Let them know you want to work out whatever problems they’re having and that you value them as employees.
Identify the Problems

Challenging employees may:

- Complain.
- Goof off or be frequently absent or late.
- Refuse to cooperate with you and coworkers.
- Break the rules.
- Have a bad attitude.
- Think they know more than everybody else, including you.
- Spread rumors.
- Display anger.

These kinds of behaviors can be counterproductive and sometimes destructive. They can damage morale and make it tough for you to lead your work group to ensure continued productivity.

Tip

Always follow up on all interactions with problem employees. Ensure that their situations have been resolved and that they’re back to being positive and productive. Keep monitoring the situation until you’re sure the change is permanent.

Deal with Poor Performance

When the behavior of challenging employees leads to poor performance, look at these potential causes and work to correct them:

- **Unclear expectations.** Performance problems may occur when an employee doesn’t know or understand the standards that must be met. Ensure that all employees know exactly what is expected for each task they perform.

- **Inadequate skills or knowledge.** When employees lack necessary skills or knowledge to perform a job well, they’re likely to fail. Assess required knowledge, skills, and competencies for each job, and ensure employees get appropriate training.

- **Workplace conflict.** Conflict with you or coworkers may result in performance problems. To solve this problem, determine the cause of the conflict and work with those in conflict to resolve issues.

- **Resistance to change.** In order to help an employee change a poor attitude in a positive way, the employee must first be willing to change, otherwise your efforts will be futile. See the suggested solutions in the box at the top of this page.

---

This issue of FRONTLINE SUPERVISION is written by Heather Hunt. FRONTLINE SUPERVISION (ISSN 1550-9699) is published every month by M. Lee Smith Publishers®, a division of BLR®—Business & Legal Resources, 100 Winners Circle, Suite 300, P.O. Box 5094, Brentwood, TN 37024-5094, 800-274-6774 or custserv@blr.com. © 2014 BLR®—Business & Legal Resources. Photocopying or reproducing in any form in whole or in part is a violation of federal copyright law and is strictly prohibited without the publisher’s consent. This publication provides practical information concerning the subject matters covered. It is provided with the understanding that neither the publisher nor the writer is rendering legal advice or other professional service. Some of the information provided in this publication contains a broad overview of federal law. The law changes regularly, and the law may vary from state to state and from one locality to another. You should consult a competent attorney in your state if you are in need of specific legal advice concerning any of the subjects addressed in this publication.