Ready, Aim, Coach: How HR Can (and Should) Coach Managers on Problem Employee Behaviors

By: Melodie Howard
Program Director
UNC Executive Development

A Common Problem

We've all been there. It's Monday morning. You've had a good weekend and arrive in the office ready for a new week. Carol had a good weekend too. She had plenty of time to mull over the situation with her direct report, Joe. He's good at what he does—really good. But Joe has to go. He's a thorn in her side and is lowering morale in the IT department. She can't wait to share her news with you and walks into your office shortly after you arrive. It's time, she announces, that you fire Joe.

Introduction

Problem employees are the bane of everyone's existence in an organization. They cause productivity to plummet and damage morale. Because few people enjoy conflict, managers often go to extremes to avoid addressing the problem behavior. It seems inevitable that it winds up in the HR department. Unfortunately, by the time it does, the damage has already been done and the clean-up can take months.

This white paper will show HR and talent managers how to use coaching skills to help managers handle problem employee behavior and reduce the workplace costs associated with problem employees.

> **According to one 2004 study, executive coaching at Booz Allen Hamilton returned $7.90 for every dollar the business consulting firm spent on coaching.**

The High Cost of Problem Employees

Problem employees and "toxic" workplaces are, unfortunately, more prevalent than ever. A 2008 SHRM/Ethics Resource Center survey found that 57 percent of respondents said they had witnessed abusive or intimidating behavior (excluding sexual harassment) toward co-workers.

Nearly half of all respondents to a survey conducted by the Employment Law Alliance reported that they had worked for abusive bosses. The Workplace Bullying Institute estimates that approximately 54 million U.S. workers have been bullied at work. When bystanders are included, workplace bullying affects nearly half of all full and part-time employees in the United States (SHRM, 2010).

Problem employees add stress to the workplace which costs U.S. employers an estimated $300 billion annually in lost productivity and turnover. In terms of productivity, 80 percent of employees who reported being insulted or bullied at work said they lost work time worrying about the incident and 78 percent said their commitment to their employer decreased (Porath and Pearson, 2009).

Lower productivity and morale are not the only costs associated with problem employees. Employees who experience or witness uncivil behavior are more likely to quit, taking their talent with them and costing employers an estimated 150 percent of a mid-level manager's salary to replace (Porath and Pearson, 2009, SHRM).

To make matters worse, bad behavior and attitudes are like the common cold; they are easily spread to co-workers. If problem behavior is not checked, other employees (consciously or unconsciously) perceive that the employer accepts the behavior and will tend to adopt it as well. Problem behavior can undermine an organization's culture.

Types of Manageable Problem Behavior in Employees

Let's take the example of Carol, the IT professional who believes her direct report, Joe, must go. Carol's background is probably not in human resources, social services or psychology. She is probably a technical professional who was promoted into a position where managing others is required. Carol may know that Joe irks her and others around her, but she simply may not be able to articulate why—making the opportunity to coach her with her problem employee all the more challenging.

In my experience as an organizational development professional, manageable problem employee behavior generally falls into one of eight categories:

1. **Technician-Turned-Managers:** Their high proficiency in their technical areas of expertise (e.g., IT, finance, R&D) probably led them to be promoted into a management position. Unfortunately, what made them great technicians may not match the skills they need as a manager.

    They are used to doing their work as individual contributors and are unclear on how to get work done through others. They earn a reputation of being a micromanager because they cannot delegate and are often heard saying that they can't get anything done because of "all these people showing up at my door and asking questions." Because their previous roles were so insular and their expertise so specialized, they are ill-equipped for managing others and being more extroverted.

2. **The Oblivious:** This category includes any and all permutations of a "lack of self-awareness." These employees are generally unaware of their surroundings or themselves and as a result, clash with others in the workplace. These are the employees who think they are better, smarter, more productive than everyone else. They simply don't understand that their behavior is disruptive to co-workers or why others react to them in such an exaggerated manner ("I'm just a straightforward type guy. It's not my problem that they can't handle the truth.").

    This category includes employees who don't "show up" in appropriate ways; the senior leader who has no executive presence or the customer service supervisor who uses inappropriate speech.

3. **Naysayers:** These employees generally have bad attitudes or an underdeveloped ability to solve problems. If there is a challenge at hand, they tend to add to it. They can give you all the reasons it won't work, but seldom offer a solution. They are constant "kvetchers" who tend to bring the entire unit's morale down a few notches. Beware of the cheerful naysayers—the ones whose discouraging comments are delivered with a cheerful smile or sotto voce. They are likely to express their disapproval outside the meeting versus directly in the meeting.

4. **People Pleasers:** Believe it or not, people pleasers can get in the way of employee morale and productivity. These people are incapable of saying no and because of that, they tend to feel and act overwhelmed and victimized. Their inclination to "over-promise and under-deliver" earns them a reputation of being untrustworthy.

    People pleasers are frequently fence sitters. They are the leaders who can't or won't make a decision for fear of upsetting people. Their inability to make decisions can leave subordinates feeling frustrated, confused and stressed out.

5. **The Passive-Aggressive:** Passive-aggressive employees avoid addressing problems at all costs but can inflame them by stirring the pot with negativity or innuendo. Like naysayers, they prefer to stir the pot outside of meetings.

6. **Poor Communicators:** We all know how critical good communication is to organizational success, but few employees are actually trained in what good communication is. Bad communicators either fail to pass on critical information, fail to do so effectively, or do so in a manner that is perceived as ineffectual or abrasive.

7. **Credit Hogs:** Credit hogs may be the antithesis of the oblivious employee. They are absolutely aware of themselves and others and are quick to use others to raise themselves up. They tend to claim credit for everything and share credit for nothing. They are corporate climbers in the worst sense of the term.

8. **Volatiles:** These are the tightly wound, overly emotional and unpredictable employees. They can be bullies or simply highly unpleasant to work with.

It is important to note that these categories are not mutually exclusive. It is entirely possible to have an employee or manager who is an oblivious naysayer with a bad attitude. However, all of these categories can offer coachable moments that can lead to real behavioral improvement.

The Un-Manageables

Unfortunately, there are some problem behaviors that are simply un-manageable. In most cases, these behaviors lead to termination of employment.

Incompetents:
These employees are simply bad hires who cannot meet the requirements of the job.

One-trick ponies:
One-trick ponies have been extremely successful at something but can't or won't learn something new as job requirements and company demands shift and change.

Liars/cheaters:
Liars and cheaters are fundamentally flawed individuals who will break an organization's code of ethics and perhaps even the law to get ahead.

Coaching the Manager

You would never hire someone to be an engineer who lacks an engineering degree—yet organizations constantly hire or promote managers who don't have the needed people skills.

Employers will promote an introverted number cruncher to head the finance department because he raised his hand for the job, thinking that was the only way to get ahead in the organization.

It should come as no surprise, then, that he is completely unprepared for the human interaction the new job requires. He lacks the skills needed to manage people, so when his former (and now disgruntled) co-worker starts acting up because she was passed over for the promotion, he ignores it. Suddenly, the requests for internal transfers and departmental turnover spike. Unfortunately, HR often becomes aware of the problem far too late.

Traditional HR methods to handle (or head off) problem employees, like performance improvement plans, should be the last step in any disciplinary process. Before it reaches that point, managers should be taught the tools needed to address problem employee behavior. They must be coached, and this is where HR and talent management professionals can truly contribute.

Coaching is simply moving valuable people from where they are to where they want or need to be.

The Benefits of Coaching Managers for Organizations

- Costly and time-consuming problems overcome.

- Increased employee skills so managers can delegate more tasks, allowing managers to focus more on managerial responsibilities like planning.

- Improved productivity by helping people work smarter.

- Better retention; employee loyalty and motivation are improved when their supervisors take time with them to help them improve their skills.

- More effective use of company resources; coaching costs less than formal training.

(Source: HBS Press Book, 2006)

Some of the most effective coaches are also exemplary models—they "walk the talk." As it applies to addressing problem employees, HR and talent management professionals can help managers identify the problem behavior, analyze it, develop approaches to discuss it with the employee, create an employee "contract" to address the behavior, and in general, develop a culture that is supportive of open dialogue.

Step 1: Help the Manager Identify the Problem Behavior

Good coaches ask good questions. Ask some variation of the following questions to help the manager articulate the problem behavior (consider using some of the types of problem behaviors as a framework):

- "Let's focus on the employee's behavior. What types of behavior is she exhibiting?"

- "Has this happened before? Was it a one-time incident or is it ongoing? When does it happen?"

- "What do you want her to stop doing? What do you want her to do differently?"

- "Have you discussed this behavior directly with the employee before?"

- "Have you or previous managers documented this behavior in any previous performance reviews?"

These questions will help managers identify the problem behavior. By asking if the behavior has happened before, you are establishing a baseline for the behavior. Managers also tend to focus on recent events, so asking if the behavior has happened before will allow them to focus on broader themes rather than one-time events.

Finally, the last two questions will establish if there has been any communication with the employee regarding the behavior. There is a good chance the answer to both of these questions will be "no", and for now, that's fine. Your job is to coach the manager to acquire the skills and confidence to have a constructive conversation with the employee focused on behavior.

Step 2: Help the Manager Analyze the Behavior

Once you've helped the manager identify the problem behavior, analyze it. Ask the manager what he or she thinks the implications would be if nothing was done to address the problem behavior. Help them establish a decision tree.

Is the problem behavior important enough to address? Encourage the manager to analyze the costs and benefits of addressing the behavior. If it is not affecting the productivity or morale, addressing it may do more harm than good. Assess with the manager his or her patience with the employee in terms of giving the employee the time to change the behavior.

Ask the manager to consider how doing nothing about the problem may affect the rest of the departmental team, customers, clients and organizational profitability. Is it really an ingrained problem behavior that is affecting productivity and morale? Is it affecting organizational profitability? Is it endangering others? If the answer is yes to any of these questions, intervention is needed.

These questions should be considered at this stage:

- Is the employee aware that his or her job performance is not meeting expectations?

- If the employee is meeting job expectations, is it how he or she accomplishes it that's the problem?

- Does the employee clearly understand his or her roles and responsibilities?

- Has the employee's roles and responsibilities shifted in the recent past (e.g., promotion, new boss, different projects)? Is he or she having personal issues outside of work (e.g., death, divorce, illness)? Could these changes be affecting work performance and/or attitude?

Step 3: Develop Approaches on How to Discuss it with the Employee

Unless the behavior is clearly against the organization's policies or code of conduct or is illegal, then it is most likely an opportunity to manage the employee towards better behavior. It is important to let the manager know that the objective of the discussion with the employee is not to terminate employment but to work together to address the problem behavior.

The reason for this is twofold. First, it is highly likely that the manager entered your office with his or her mind already made up; it's time to fire the employee. Reframing the context of the meeting from termination to an employee development opportunity is vital at this stage—the manager has to support the new approach. Secondly, it reframes the meeting with the employee from "confrontation" to "conversation." A conversation isn't nearly as daunting to all parties involved.

Now that the manager can articulate the problem behavior, coach him or her in the ways to deliver behavioral feedback. Try role playing with the manager to analyze different approaches to take. Encourage the manager to provide concrete examples to help the employee identify the issue. Coach the manager to include how the employee's behavior is affecting others ("Joe, you've been late to work four times last week. Other employees had to cover for you, causing them to get behind in their own work.") and what the manager can do to help the situation. Be sure to discuss possible reactions the employee may have (denial, embarrassment, defensiveness) and how to handle them.

Ask the manager to identify desired outcomes of the meeting.

- What goals will the manager and employee mutually agree to that will address the problem behavior?

- What will success look like?

- What timeframe will be established for successful resolution?

- At the end of the meeting, will the employee clearly understand the implications of not correcting the problem behavior?

- Will the employee understand that the outcomes of the meeting will be documented and why?

Step 4: Show the Manager How to Create a Contract with the Employee

The meeting with the employee to address the problem behavior will no doubt be emotional for both parties, and it may be easy to forget some of the desired outcomes and timeframes agreed to during the meeting. The manager should put this all in writing to help the employee and to establish a good legacy for future managers regarding the employee's development.

Unfortunately, for many managers, writing is a stumbling block. Remember the introverted number cruncher? He hates to write and has never heard of the term "behavioral descriptors." It's all HR speak to him. He's going to need some more coaching to learn how to effectively document the discussion.

Coach him in how good behavioral descriptors provide detail on the problem behavior, including instances when it occurred, and a recommendation on how to effectively address it.

The Benefits of Coaching Managers for Managers

- Enhanced skills and knowledge to advance their careers.

- Feeling of organization's support and encouragement.

- More pride and satisfaction that comes with surmounting new challenges.

(Source: HBS Press Book, 2006)

Bad behavioral descriptors ("You are just not a team player." "You are rude in meetings." "You are too negative.") fail to provide the employee context and a solution. Good behavioral descriptors ("When bringing concerns forward about project implementation, you focus on what will not work. In the future, I'd like for you to focus on bringing some positive aspects or potential solutions to these issues as well as your concerns.") will help the employee identify when the behavior likely occurs and how to effectively address it.

Follow Up with the Manager: You've Been Coached

Follow-up with the manager to see if the employee's behavior has improved and review the steps you and the manager took together to address the problem. Let them know that they were coached and learned valuable skills (you may want to recap them) that you hope they will apply to future employee behavioral problems. In fact, let them know you may call on them some day to help another manager through a similar situation—each one, teach one. This will not only help them become effective coaches, it will help move your entire organization toward a more developmental culture.

About UNC Executive Development

Our approach to program design and delivery draws upon the power of real-world, applicable experiences from our faculty and staff, integrated with the knowledge our client partners share about the challenges they face.

We call this approach The Power of Experience. We combine traditional with experiential and unique learning. Through action learning and business simulation activities, we challenge participants to think, reflect and make decisions differently.

Our Approach: The Partnership

Our team customizes each leadership program through a highly collaborative process that involves our clients, program directors, faculty and program managers. This integrated approach consistently drives strong outcomes.

Our Approach: The Results

Our executive education programs are designed with results in mind. Below are a few examples of the results our client partners have achieved:

- Leadership refocused with new strategy and cohesive vision
- Strategic plans created for the global marketplace
- Supply chains streamlined

- Products redefined
- New markets targeted
- Cost-saving measures developed
- Silos leveled
- Teams aligned

Participants leave empowered to bring in new ideas, present different ways to grow business and tackle challenges. The result is stronger individuals leading stronger teams and organizations.

Contact Us

Website: www.execdev.unc.edu
Phone: 1.800.862.3932
Email: unc_exec@unc.edu

Resources

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