

“ONE BAD APPLE CAN RUIN...”

Three Types of Problem Employees and How to Manage Them



That's right. You know the saying and it holds true in your towing business as well. If even one employee on your team exhibits undesirable behavior or does not perform up to speed, it's not just your problem. It's a major problem for the entire company.

As a business owner or manager, dealing with difficult employees is one of the most important responsibilities you have. It is also the most challenging. Just one problem employee can lessen productivity and hurt the morale of your entire team.

The Impact on Top Performers

This especially impacts your top performers who resent having to take up the slack and hate working with negative people who complain, cause conflict, are doing the bare minimum, or are simply incompetent. Since top performers are rare and are critical to your success, you need to do what it takes to keep them. Your best

effort is to create an environment that appeals to them—one where people work together as a team, have positive attitudes, are dedicated to the company, and are supportive of each other.

Otherwise, the highest quality employees will become increasingly frustrated. They will not understand why you tolerate bad behavior and poor performance. In turn, they will lose confidence in your ability to manage. Eventually, they will stop working at the highest level or, even worse, they may look elsewhere for a new job.

The Impact on Customers

Another reason you must take ac-

tion with a problem employee is that customers talk. The towing business is highly competitive, fast-paced, and stressful. You need quality service for your company from people in all levels of the company. A negative encounter with any individual on your staff can be a disaster. This is something you simply can't afford.

When a customer calls to request towing service, he/she expects your employee to be knowledgeable, sound welcoming, and be sincere in the desire to help them. With the high degree of urgency in this circumstance, customers expect all your employees to help them. They expect a fast response to phone calls and error-free billing. If that is not their experience, your entire company will get a bad reputation.

The Internal Customer Needs Support

In much the same way, if your internal customers need quality service from everyone on your team, it can cause problems and impede your company's ability to win the best body-shops, auto-dealers and commercial customers.

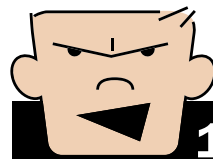
Employee Replacement is Not the Answer

While it takes time, energy, and patience to change a problem employee, it is still cheaper than recruiting, hiring, and training a replacement.

If you can successfully modify and improve an employee's behavior and performance, the "rehabilitated" employee can become one of your organization's greatest assets. Employee retention is the goal, unless of course, you realize the employee is not competent. Then, unfortunately, you may have to terminate them.

Three Common Types of Problem Employees

For most companies, the three most common types of problem employees are the negative ones, the under performers and those who create conflict. The following is an overview of each group and the typical behaviors:



1.

NEGATIVE EMPLOYEES - The Grumblers

Some employees are simply negative or become negative as time goes on and frustrations build.

Negative employees are easy to describe. They rarely smile and hardly ever laugh. While competent in their job role, they will make negative remarks about you, your company, their coworkers, and/or your customers. This occurs particularly when they are given a directive or when something is requested.

Sometimes they won't say anything, but you can observe their negative body language with a smirk, eye roll or a scowl. Or, you'll hear the person make a low grumble that they want everyone to hear.

Negative employees will not be open to new procedures or any new ways of doing things. They will complain that the company's new business model is a waste of time and will fail. If they see how a process or system is bogged down, they will complain about it to their coworkers. They will never suggest a new way to function. When new ideas are presented, they will invariably shoot them down.

If there's a problem, they wait for someone else to fix it. If they make

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a mistake or let something fall through the cracks, it will always be someone else's fault.

They react negatively if they see someone doing something positive. They see challenges as obstacles, not as stepping-stones to a better future and a better world.

Negative people tend to associate with other negative people. This could very well be the beginning of the lunch hour group, "Happy to Be Miserable and Spread Misery Club."

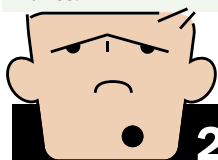
Whether they are aware of it or not, negativity is the driving force in their lives. They consider themselves "victims" of whomever or whatever, maybe even the fact that they have to work for a living. Sadly, they do not realize that thinking of themselves as victims of their world and being negative keeps them feeling oppressed and holds them back from professional accomplishment and personal happiness.

WHAT TO DO?

Never let negativity take hold in your company. Immediately confront any employee who makes negative remarks. If you don't take action quickly, their negativity will spread to others and gradually pull down your entire team. This is especially true if it comes in the form of chronic complaining. Then, it can even spread to your customers.

Negativity in the workplace should not be tolerated. Allow a forum for justifiable complaints within a controlled atmosphere. Perhaps an open door to these employee concerns and issues, but they should always be done in private sessions to minimize the impact on other employees and to allow you the time you need to assess the situation. You never want to be confronted in the middle of the office with negative comments and complaints.

Discourage negativity by encouraging positive suggestions. If you are not open to these ideas, you may be part of the issue. You cannot do it all; you must have the support and brainpower of your team. Let it be known early and often that you will entertain all positive thoughts on how to improve the workplace, procedures, and departmental issues that impact your team's performance.



2. UNDER PERFORMERS- The Art of doing Less

Under performers can also be easily described. In the worst case, an under performer is anyone who deliberately slacks off on the job. He/she has the capability, but not the desire to do a good job. In the book, "Wake Up and Smell the Competition," they are described as "Slackers."

These individuals only do the bare minimum - going through the motions of their jobs, but never putting their heart and soul into it. Productivity is a word that means nothing to them. They act busy when they are really not. They are notori-

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ous for making work, often doing tasks that do not need to be done at the time. They will spend hours on activities they enjoy, cleaning the storage area for instance, but next to nothing on the critical tasks. Often, those tasks will be put off to the next day, since they could not spend a few minutes past the end of the workday, or the job will be done by someone else. They will let the phone ring, hoping someone will answer it. They will never display a sense of urgency to help customers or anyone on their team.

Under performers can also come in

the form of people who are competent, punctual, and responsible. They are the "under achievers." They come in on time, take their coffee breaks, and leave on time regardless of deadlines and customer commitments. They will politely fix any problem a customer brings to them, but will rarely proactively contact a customer to find out how the project is going or if they need help getting their paperwork in on time so they can process payment.

They are content with their merit raises, and neither complains about nor expects promotions, bonuses or "exceptional" performance ratings. They "major in the minors" because they do only what is required and rarely display any real initiative beyond their job description. When they do, it's not consistent.

An under performer may feel strongly about something, but they usually prefer not to make waves. When they get a flash of inspiration or an original idea that may give you or your company better results, they rarely act on it because they are content with the status quo and are quite satisfied right where they are.

Another under performer is the employee who refuses to adapt to changing conditions.

These are the employees who refuse to do things differently. Although they do not lack competency, their minds are like concrete, permanently set. When faced with any type of change in their jobs, your top performers will roll up their sleeves and make it happen, but under performers will not, unless they are forced to do so.

WHAT TO DO?

Why would you consider these competent employees to be a problem? Because you know they are capable of contributing so much more to you, your team, and the company. In today's highly competitive and fast-changing world, companies need high achievers, not under achievers.

Your company needs people who are flexible, adaptable and willing to change to new methods of doing things. If they cannot change when necessary, they are a problem.

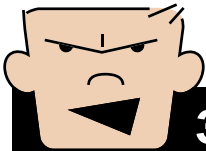
If you have a slacker on your team, he/she will pull down morale. Your quality employees will think, "Why should I work hard when he/she gets away with this?" or "Why should I have to pick up the slack?" Slackers should never be tolerated. Make certain that the moment you detect slacking, you act immediately to ferret out the cause. Often, slackers begin the behavior, which continues on until it becomes a serious problem. Make it known that, while everyone needs to pitch in, no one will be exempt from the important work at hand.

The smart manager will institute a regular "conference of work" in which each employee will briefly report on the tasks they are currently handling. This will serve two purposes, keeping informed and ensuring that each and every employee is handling important tasks.

Equally important, the smart manager must react to complaints of someone slacking off, confidentially and with tact, but they must be dealt with immediately.

Under performers who are fearful of change or are afraid to achieve will benefit from training and support. This is something that all employees need, but to varying degrees.

Be supportive and understanding, but also project the sentiment that this is not behavior that will be rewarded in the long run. If it continues, it will jeopardize the employee's job. Be firm, be fair, and be flexible. Expect only the best.



3.

CONFLICT CREATORS Causing a Stir

There are employees in every company who seem to thrive on creating conflict. This can cause tremendous problems for all involved.

These employees create anxiety, anger, intimidation, blame and resentment, morale problems, and decreased productivity. Whether their conflict is with you, one of their co-workers, or a customer, they cause the 4 "D's" -disharmony, disagreement, dissonance, and disunity.

These employees are easy to identify. They always intensify problems, challenge decisions, make accusations, display "territorialism," and even try power plays. If they are in management or supervisor positions, they often demonstrate favoritism, micro-manage projects, and talk down to their subordinates.

WHAT TO DO?

Often these employees behave very subtly. They can create conflict with a look or a word. As a manager, you must be very alert to determine where the conflict is developing and why. Keep in touch with your staff and encourage open communication.

This will lead to discovery of conflicts and their source.

12 Surefire Ways to Help Problem Employees

Employees who are negative, slack off on the job, do only what is required, refuse to change, or create conflict must have their behavior corrected. The integrity of your department and the quality of your output depends on how you handle them. The following process will assist you with the delicate issue of dealing with these types of problem employees.

1. Make the decision to take action as soon as you

detect there is a problem. Do it before their behavior becomes more deeply ingrained and harder to eradicate.

2. Ask to see the person in private. No one likes to be corrected in front of others. While this might seem too obvious and unnecessary to point out, some managers confront employees in front of others—making everyone uncomfortable. Arrange to see the employee alone during a time that is not obvious to others.

3. If possible, preface the conversation with a positive statement. When you begin a conversation with a negative statement, you immediately invite the person to put up his/her defenses. Talk to them about what they are doing right. Instead of, "Tom, you are causing problems with the team," rather begin by saying, "Tom, you are an excellent accountant. You are punctual and dependable. However, when a person makes negative remarks continually, it pulls down the morale of everyone on the team." Or, "Susan, you are a great dispatcher and well-liked by everyone. I feel you can really contribute a great deal more to this company and with this new business system I need you to do so." Or, "John, you do a great job with the equipment and have exceptional towing experience. Let's talk about the problem between you and the auto dealer."

4. Be specific as you describe the results of his/her behavior and use specific examples of occurrences. "Rich, when you made a snide remark to that customer, it caused problems with the auto club." Or, "Laura, everyone's been under pressure with the new software. The constant complaining isn't helping you, me, or anyone else."

A solid formula to use:

Here's how it's affecting me.

Here's how it's affecting your team

Here's how it's affecting customers.

5. Determine the real cause of the performance issues with questions such as:

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"Are you aware of how often you make negative remarks about people, the company, and your job?"

"Is there a pervasive problem going on in our department, or is there anything I should know about?"

"Why do I feel you don't have your heart in your work?"

"Is there anything I can do to help you enjoy your job?"

"What is causing the continuous head-butting with Susan?"

"What might be preventing you from performing more productively?"

"Do you feel you might benefit from additional training?"

"Did someone drop the ball?"

"Are you experiencing any personal problems?"

"Why was the paperwork not completed on time?"

"Why is it that we spent all that money on communication skills training, and I don't see you applying the skills?"

6. Describe your desired outcome, expected standards, or behavior change.

"Joe, we need to all pull in the same direction, maintain a positive attitude, and be helpful to our subcontractors."

7. Ask the employee for solutions and

discuss them.

"What do you think you can do to prevent this from happening?"

"Can you give yourself a little mind "tune-up" before you come into work?"

"What can you and Carol do to get along better?"

"How about if I assign you with some tasks to see how you do?"

8. Ask what you can do to help and if there's a way you can work together to improve their behavior or performance. Remind them you are there to help them. You want them to enjoy their job and be happy on your team.

9. Ask for cooperation; don't demand it.

Even though the person you must confront is a subordinate, it is never wise to demand that they change their behavior, unless you have confronted them more than twice for the same issue. You may be well within your authority to demand someone change a behavior, but by doing so you will create more hostility than you want. "Can I rely on you to..." is a phrase that works for most managers. For example, "Can I rely on you to be on time from now on?" "Can I rely on you to display a little more initiative so we can meet our goals?" "Can I rely on you to do your part to help make this merger work?" "Can I rely on you to keep your cool no matter how stressful the situation?" "Can I rely on you to give your all during this busy season?"

10. Agree on specific actions to

be done, behaviors that should be avoided, and a time frame to implement them. Then, set up another meeting to discuss progress.

11. Finish in a positive manner.

When you are finished talking make sure you maintain a positive working relationship. The individual needs to be comfortable with you and, hopefully, not take issues between you too personally. Remind them that it is your responsibility to make sure work gets done and that both internal and external customers receive good service. "Tom, I'm glad we both understand the importance of doing our best to keep our customers. Well done!" Always end any confrontation with an expression of faith and confidence in the individual. Do everything possible to preserve the individual's self-esteem.

12. Continually coach your problem employees and recognize when you see positive changes. And remember to pat them on the back when you see it.

Christine Corelli (www.christinespeaks.com) is the author of the popular books, *Wake Up and Smell the Competition*, *The ART of Influencing Customers to BUY From You*, and *Hiring and Retaining Quality Employees*. As a speaker and facilitator, she has worked with numerous towing industry groups, companies and related groups. She has been a popular presenter at numerous towing industry events. You can reach her at 847-581-9968.

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