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Healthy Teams Collection

Managing Difficult Behaviour

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Managing Difficult Behaviour

There are almost as many different types of behaviour as there are people, and while most of the time we get along well with our employees, co-workers, and supervisors, some of them can occasionally cause us to lose patience or become very frustrated. People who make our lives difficult are generally those whose behaviour contributes to a difficult work environment and prevents us from working efficiently.

As a manager, you can't ignore an employee's difficult behaviour. It's essential to eliminate it from your team as quickly as possible, because the consequences are often contagious and can have a negative impact on results. By effectively managing difficult behaviour, you'll be able to minimize conflict, improve the work environment, promote good interpersonal relationships and improve the performance of your team.

Understanding the nature of difficult behaviour

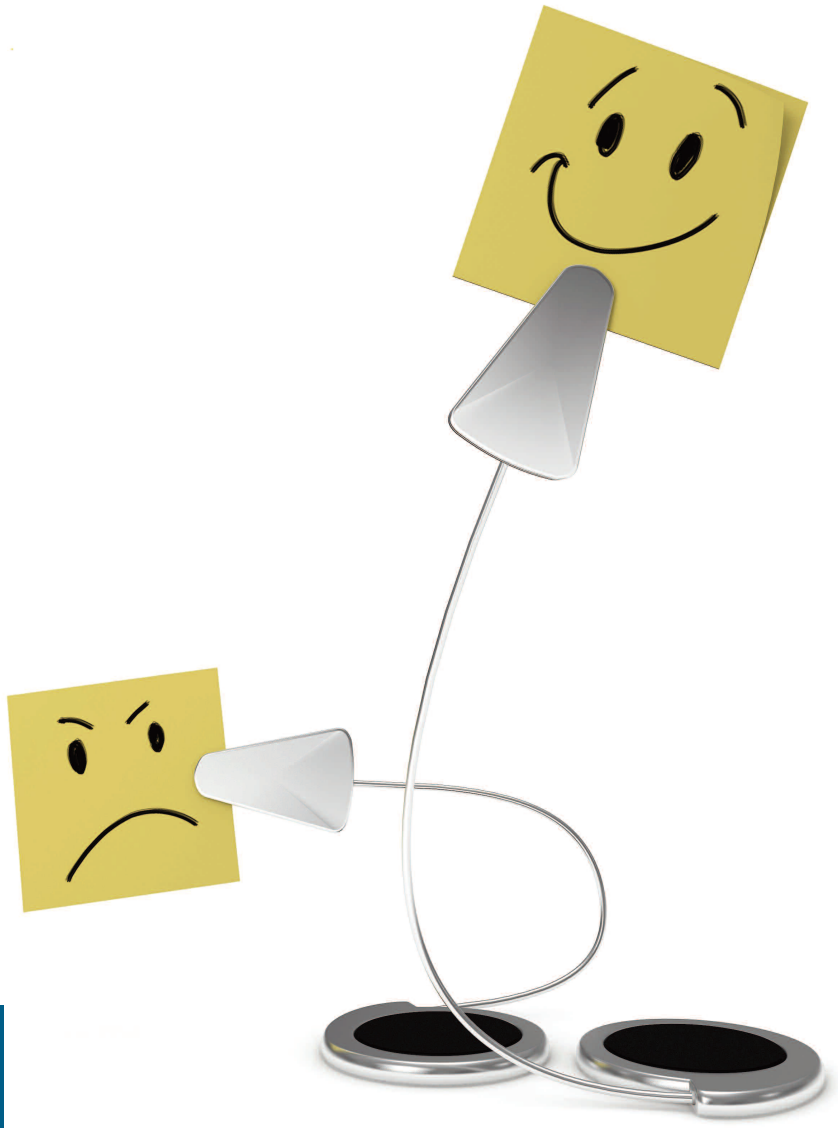
Definition of difficult behaviour

With some people, communication is easy. You have a good rapport with these people, you find them pleasant, and you work well together. With other people, you're indifferent. Then there are people who can ruin your day in an instant. You find them unpleasant, sarcastic, manipulative, apathetic or incapable of communicating. In other words, dealing with these people almost always means trouble on the horizon, lengthy discussions or tiresome situations. Is this a case of difficult behaviour?

Difficult behaviour occurs when someone regularly makes life difficult for those around them and prevents others from achieving their goals. Communicating with this kind of person is generally not an easy task. People can't relate to the person's attitude because they don't understand the person or their point of view.

Personality conflicts

Am I the only one who has a problem with this employee? If the answer is yes, then you may be dealing with a personality conflict rather than difficult behaviour. **If you find someone unmanageable while others find that person charming and cooperative, there's probably a personality conflict or a power struggle between the two of you**. However, if the person provokes the same reactions from others, i.e. no one really gets along with that person or feels comfortable with them, it's probably a case of difficult behaviour.



Don't confuse a personality conflict with difficult behaviour

Aggressive proactive or passive reactive?

Proactive personalities are generally leaders. They're independent and like to run the show, make decisions and take on challenges. **Proactive personalities exhibiting difficult behaviour, however, are generally aggressive and like to control everything**. They have little interest in team work. They feel like they're on a mission and want to take on every challenge. They only have faith in themselves and aren't too concerned with what other people think. They're willing to do almost anything to promote their ideas and achieve their goals.

Reactive personalities don't like to be in the forefront. They like to be part of a team, avoid conflict, and maintain good interpersonal relationships. **Reactive personalities exhibiting difficult behaviour are usually passive**. They don't have a very high opinion of themselves, and tend to avoid responsibility for fear of being judged poorly by their co-workers, in whom they don't have a lot of faith. Because of their reserved nature, they rarely speak out in public, and agree to almost everything they're asked to do without discussion, even when it goes against their own opinions.

Generally speaking, individuals who exhibit difficult behaviour can be classified into one of two categories: **aggressive proactive or passive reactive**. The two sidebars on this page will help you establish which category an employee belongs to. Your assessment will then help you determine the best approach to use.

Symptoms of passive reactive behaviour

- ❒ Almost always feels ashamed, humiliated or guilty when criticized.
- ❒ Expresses agreement even when they disagree.
- ❒ Their mood is usually dominated by melancholy, sadness and pessimism.
- ❒ Doesn't like working as a team for fear of being criticized or rejected.
- ❒ Constantly shuns responsibility or postpones decision-making.
- ❒ Considers the company to be the enemy, and sees authority as a threat.
- ❒ Volunteers to do unpleasant tasks so that people will like them.
- ❒ Has difficulty confiding in others for fear that the information will later be used against them.
- ❒ Is so concerned with rules and procedures that they often lose sight of the real purpose of the activity.
- ❒ Prefers not to confront people even if they are seething on the inside and knows that they are right.

Symptoms of aggressive proactive behaviour

- ❒ Becomes arrogant or quick-tempered when things don't go as expected; has a difficult time controlling their emotions.
- ❒ Doesn't like working in a team because they have no faith in anyone else and wants to take credit for the results.
- ❒ Constantly minimizes or ridicules other people's feelings and emotions.
- ❒ Judges the results of their actions in terms of personal gains and losses, and is irritated by the feeling of losing.
- ❒ Overestimates their abilities and the importance of their achievements.
- ❒ Makes no effort to please others.
- ❒ Is moody and often behaves inappropriately for the situation.
- ❒ Has fantasies of success and power, and likes to be the hero.
- ❒ When this person's point of view is criticized, they become dogmatic and closed to discussion.
- ❒ Is distant and cold, doesn't like to socialize unless there's some opportunity for personal gain.

Choosing the right approach

Organizational causes

Regardless of the type of difficult behaviour, before taking action it's important to determine the reason for the behaviour. Does it stem from the employee? Is it caused by your own behaviour towards the employee, or by the organization? Difficult behaviour can be related to one or more of these causes. When the problem is associated with the work environment, it's often just a question of misunderstood methods or procedures. By diagnosing the work environment before meeting with the employee, you'll be able to prepare solutions to the problems that are within your authority as a manager.

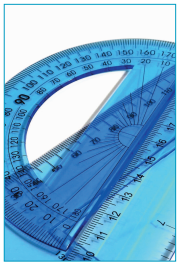
Examples of organizational causes

- Poorly defined or misunderstood strategies and objectives
- Policies and procedures that are inconsistent with established objectives
- Confusing breakdown of responsibilities among team members and poorly defined degrees of autonomy
- Lack of adequate resources (materials, equipment, training, etc.)
- Poorly defined or misunderstood individual performance objectives
- Inability to do a good job in the time allotted
- Little or no feedback about the quality of the work
- Differences of opinion and constructive criticism not encouraged, and perceived as obstacles to productivity
- Poor communication, lack of conflict management, etc.

Two behaviours, two approaches

From time to time, everyone can have trouble adjusting to a given situation or environment. But when these "adjustment problems" become a regular occurrence with one of your team members, you need to take action, not only to maintain your authority, but also to keep the problem from spreading. **People who exhibit difficult behaviour are often leaders, particularly those with a proactive personality**. These people are generally able to convince their co-workers of the relevance of their reactions, and can easily lead others in a crusade against authority.

The influence that reactive personalities have over others can be just as harmful. Even though their negative attitude is less apparent, their co-workers still sense it. **Like the proactive personality, passive reactive personalities can then foster feelings of animosity and frustration**. As a result, it's a good idea to take immediate action when an employee starts exhibiting any kind of difficult behaviour. It's crucial that you do something before your credibility is affected and the problem spreads to other members of the team. The following page presents the recommended approach for each type of difficult behaviour.



Proactive personalities have a need for recognition, independence and self-actualization

THE CHAMPION: A leader

Champions see themselves as the very best. They always have the last word in any conversation or something to add to what other people have said. They like to prove that they're right. Radiating assurance in their actions and words, they have the attitude of someone who's not easily impressed, and their decisions are often motivated by self-interest. Champions never openly show their weaknesses. Arguing with this kind of person is a pointless exercise that will only give them more reason to prove themselves right.

Avoid pointless discussions that will get you nowhere. Instead, make sure you're armed with precise, irrefutable facts about the consequences of the behaviour.

THE PERFECTIONIST: An overachiever

When the **Perfectionist** does a job, it has to be perfect, with no mistakes whatsoever. For them, mistakes are simply unacceptable. Perfectionists are convinced that the objectives won't be achieved if the work doesn't conform to their own standards, which are often unnecessarily high. If you ask a Perfectionist to change their behaviour, you'll be perceived as "the bad guy" and the person will automatically get defensive. If you openly oppose a Perfectionist, you'll only provoke them and accentuate their tendency to go too far.

Choose a particular behaviour you want changed, establish specific standards and deadlines, and make sure the Perfectionist can't deviate from your instructions.

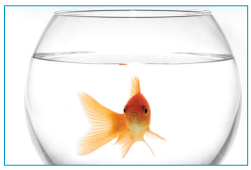
Reactive personalities need security and a strong sense of belonging

THE FOLLOWER: A validation seeker

Followers have a lot of trouble taking responsibility for anything. They never manage to make a decision, forever weighing the pros and cons. Their inability to assert themselves causes them to accept jobs that no one else wants. They rarely disagree with others for fear that people won't like their opinion. Followers often rely on a co-worker (a "confidant") who validates their behaviour.

Approaching the person's confidant to discuss how they could assist you with your intervention process can be helpful, provided they endorse your approach and they're willing to help.

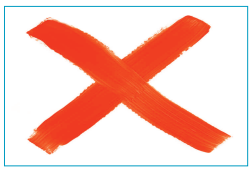
THE LONER: An individualist



Loners don't like working as a team because they tend to focus on the negative aspects of interpersonal relationships. They often judge people's attitudes harshly, and attach a lot of importance to inequities. Loners are reserved and keep to themselves. They appear to not be affected by either criticism or praise, and their lack of sociability makes them seem cold and distant. Loners need to be approached with caution. It's important to ease their mistrust and build their self-confidence.

Make sure your intervention isn't perceived as a threat, but as an offer of assistance.

THE DEFEATIST: A pessimist



Pessimists are often sad and miserable, and see only misfortune around them. This is the team member who sees the glass as half empty, while everyone else sees it as half full. They tend to put themselves down and have low self-esteem. Pessimists often drain the other team members' energy. Ask for help from at least two optimistic people who are immune to the attitudes of the Defeatist so they can encourage the person to modify their behaviour.

Recognize the efforts and progress the person is making by highlighting their achievements, even if you feel they're not making much headway.

Company culture can contribute to the development of difficult behaviour

Developing an action plan

A three-step process

In order to have lasting results, any behavioural change should be a three-step process. This process can be summarized by the three R's: recognize, reject and replace. Before a person can modify their behaviour, they first need to admit that there's a problem. Then they have to choose to give up the behaviour, and lastly, decide to replace it with a new, more desirable behaviour. Regardless of the type of difficult behaviour, the three R's should be the basis of your intervention strategy.

RECOGNIZE

First you need to clearly define the behaviour that needs to be modified.

REJECT

Secondly, you need to indicate that you'll no longer tolerate the behaviour in question and its consequences.

REPLACE

Lastly, you need to ask the employee to modify the inappropriate behaviour and replace it with a behaviour that meets your expectations.

Intervention strategy

You need to focus your meeting with the employee on the consequences of their behaviour. Start the discussion by clearly defining the nature of the inappropriate behaviour. **Express your expectations based on tangible facts that illustrate the consequences of their behaviour on the productivity and performance of the team**. If you can take any corrective action as a manager (in terms of the organizational factors, for example), talk to the employee about it. Then ask what the employee plans to do to correct the situation. If the employee disputes the consequences of the behaviour, use the impact chart (see below) to help you define the positive and negative impacts of the current behaviour and the desired behaviour.

This process will help the employee "recognize" and "reject" the behaviour so it can then be "replaced". The objective is to make the employee realize what they have to gain by changing. **If the employee still doesn't cooperate, make it clear that you will no longer tolerate the situation and explain the disciplinary measures that will be taken if things don't change**. Make the employee understand that you want to see an immediate, substantial change in their behaviour to bring it more in line with the desired behaviour. Then plan a follow-up meeting in the short term.

Impact Chart

CURRENT BEHAVIOUR

Positive impacts

(e.g.: leadership role within the team)

Negative impacts

(e.g.: tension, risk of job loss)

DESIRED BEHAVIOUR

Positive impacts

(e.g.: better chances of advancement)

Negative impacts

(e.g.: could lose face momentarily)

Prevention through communication

The use of effective communication methods is an excellent way to prevent problems associated with difficult behaviour. **Communication reduces the chances of misunderstandings and misinterpretation, as well as improving teamwork and promoting positive attitudes**. Ongoing communication, whether formal or informal, encourages good interpersonal relationships and team spirit. It also prevents or limits prejudices, and reduces emotional situations often caused by not knowing or not understanding the facts. Touching base regularly with team members promotes the exchange of different points of view and reduces tension.

To build and maintain a positive work environment, it's important that different points of view be encouraged in an environment of trust and sharing of information. This will help you promote more open-mindedness and a greater sense of responsibility and motivation among your employees. Creating a peaceful environment where team members can communicate and express their individual needs, makes it much easier to discourage the development of difficult behaviour.

Rules for better communication

- Require that all team members use an appropriate, respectful tone.
- Regularly communicate information to your team that can help them understand their tasks and responsibilities.
- Hold regular information meetings, whether formal or informal, to promote discussion.
- Provide as many details as necessary to improve employees' understanding of information that's circulating.
- Encourage the use of facts or concrete examples to explain different points of view.
- Create dialogue and discussion using open-ended questions.
- Show that differing opinions and constructive comments are not only acceptable, but desirable.

Difficult behaviour generally leads to dysfunctional interpersonal relationships. If you clearly define the acceptable code of conduct and your level of tolerance with respect to negative attitudes, you can help to create a work environment that's conducive to the growth and development of all team members.

By being clear and specific about your expectations and not tolerating negative attitudes and difficult behaviour on a day-to-day basis, you'll be sending a very clear message about your desire to build a harmonious, functional team. At the same time, you'll also be demonstrating your superior leadership skills and your ability to maintain a positive work environment.

Professional resources for managers

The Posaction® Plus management assistance program is included in your group insurance contract. The program includes training modules, coaching, a post-traumatic counselling service and psychosocial assistance for troubled employees.

Confidential telephone coaching

- Monday to Friday, from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (ET)

1.877.744.2789

Post-traumatic counselling

- Round-the-clock service for serious incidents

1.800.668.0193

For more details about the program
www.posactionplus.com

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Your management assistance program

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By referring employees to professional resources, you'll be helping them take concrete steps to resolve their problems and regain their regular performance at work.

Round-the-clock confidential service

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