



Identifying and Leading Difficult or Resistant Employees

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A couple of years ago, I worked with a middle school of about 125 staff in a semi-affluent suburb. A student there had assaulted a teacher so severely that that teacher was hospitalized. During interviews with faculty prior to my arrival to train on behavioral interventions, I repeatedly heard a line that I couldn't put into context until later: "At least they got the right one."

Every organization has one: the employee who sets your teeth on edge, the one whose face appears to taunt any new idea, who spreads dissent like cancer. Workplace bullies take a huge toll on administrators, staff and students.

While these individuals are a detriment to you and their co-workers, not all are lost causes. They simply require a different level of leadership, and an understanding of their unique motivations for driving everyone crazy.

Are you working with an Aggressor? A Saboteur? Identify your difficult employee below and use these proven strategies for neutralizing their impact on your school or, if necessary, supporting their next career move elsewhere.

Name that Difficult Employee

Type & Traits

Aggressors - Can't stand wimps and will target people who appear weak, but will grow angrier and more aggressive if they perceive a personal attack.

Saboteurs - Will deliberately undermine people by not sharing all pertinent information. Tend to gossip and blame people for things they didn't do.

Know It Alls – They are always right and won't listen to anyone else's point of view.

Procrastinators - Stall major decisions as a compromise between being honest and not hurting anyone, hoping the decision will go away.

Source: Tymson, C. (2001). *Intervention in School*, v115, n1, p14-17.



Determine Your Style

The middle school I mentioned was going through a tough transition from a formerly white-collar, two-parent suburb to a student body from many single-parent families and increasing racial diversity. Some teachers were making the evolution well, while a few

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others were becoming more and more rigid. The teacher sent to the hospital was known to make fun of kids, single kids out for correction, interrupt staff meetings with inappropriate opinions, etc.

I've found, on average, that 10 percent of employees in schools (as well as nonprofits and businesses) are really difficult people. Another 10 percent are overachievers, which leaves about 80 percent in the middle; the "silent majority". According to John Beck and Neil Yeager, authors of "The Leader's Window" (2001), there are four main leadership styles that you can use to work with all of them: Director, Problem-Solver, Developer, and Delegator.

Because most administrators are former teachers, they tend to favor and over-use the Developer leadership style (i.e. sitting down with the employee to develop solutions to problems together). The truth is, no single leadership style can work for every person or for every situation. But employees who generally underperform need to be addressed in a respectful Director style (Dictates performance; little or no discussion) or Problem-Solver style (Seeks input, but makes final decision). By making it clear to your staff that different situations will require a different leadership style and that you treat all employees fairly, but not equally, you eliminate the difficult employee's favorite tool of dissent — unfair treatment.

In their book, Beck and Yeager tell us that if each of the four leadership styles were assigned a number, they would be 1 for Director, 2 for Problem-Solver, 3 for Developer and 4 for Delegator. To determine the leadership style that works best in most situations for each employee, they use the formula *Employee Ability + Employee Motivation = Leadership Style*. Assign each problem employee a 0, 1 or 2 (low to high) for ability, and 0, 1, or 2 (low to high) for level of motivation. The resulting number will determine the most appropriate leadership style (Example: 2 points for ability + 0 points for motivation = leadership style #2 (Problem-solver; Seeks input, but makes final decision)).

By doing this exercise with school leaders, I've helped those leaders discover that most their most difficult employees require the Director leadership style, yet most administrators are coaching them to death or giving them freedom to solve their own



problems. In reality, the Developer and Delegation styles should only be used with your best employees.

Confront the Problem

Getting ready to confront difficult employees requires organized thinking. Ultimately, you want the employee to hear clearly what needs to change while avoiding unproductive conversation. Here are three ways to prepare:

1. *Focus.* Identify two or three primary problems with the employee, then choose one. Your chances of success go up dramatically if you focus on that one problem, deliver what needs to happen as a monologue and eliminate any chance for discussion. Avoid small talk and get right to the issue.
2. *Venue.* Control the venue so that when you are finished speaking, you can leave or send the person back to work. Organize your office so that you can leave first or stand at the door and tell the employee when the meeting is

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over. If you are confronting a particularly belligerent employee (an Aggressor), consider having an administrative peer present. You may also consider meeting the difficult person downtown for coffee. Most aggressors will not be as aggressive out in public, and that may increase the chance that they will listen to the issue that you present.

3. *Practice* It may sound silly, but practice the monologue with a trusted colleague prior to the meeting to ensure a confident tone, to eliminate qualifiers or an opening for discussion, and clearly indicate that the meeting is over when you are finished speaking.

If for some reason the difficult employee anticipates a confrontation and insists on another colleague in the room, reschedule the meeting until you are able to arrange for an administrative peer to be present.

Above all, when managing difficult employees, you must take care of yourself first. Confronting people is an emotional risk, and you owe it to yourself to schedule lunch with a friend right after the meeting or leave the building for a short break. You will be much more productive and relaxed when you return.



Following the student assault on teachers at the middle school, the administration took a differentiated approach when dealing with their difficult employees. They used a coaching technique to help the majority of staff handle the trauma, and then facilitated a strategic planning session and behavioral audit, from which they practiced Problem-Solver and Director leadership styles with those teachers who were not dealing appropriately with students.

The consequences of not confronting your most difficult employees are numerous, beginning with their ability to erode the confidence of staff during major decisions, and convincing the silent majority that they are right. This can lead to losses including staff resignations, lower productivity, a lack of vision within the school and continued staff conflict.

While it is not easy for to confront difficult school employees, it is far better in the long run to take an emotional risk and confront them than to risk the long term success of your school.

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