

Introduction

Just as virtually everyone has had some bad bosses over the course of their career, so company owners, managers, and other employees have commonly had an experience with a difficult employee. Bad employees can cause major headaches for their bosses, especially if they are not dealt with in a timely and decisive way. They can also negatively affect the entire workplace, contributing to lowered morale, reduced productivity and higher turnover.

Some bosses feel stymied about what kind of action they can take, particularly in this age of empowered employees, where lawsuits for wrongful termination, harassment, and creating an oppressive workplace environment are all too common. How can you deal with a difficult employee in such an atmosphere? Are you able to fire that employee if other measures to correct the problem don't succeed?

Whatever the problem, there are many things you can do to maintain control—from carefully interviewing and checking out the employee before you hire, to meeting with the employee at the first sign of trouble, to keeping a detailed paper trail when an employee looks like trouble.

What makes a difficult employee? They come in all varieties and combinations. Many bad employees would create problems in any situation or workplace. But sometimes what makes for a difficult employee in one working culture—such as a loner in a highly social,

team-player environment—may make for a highly productive and valuable employee in another setting. For example, that same loner in a high-tech company, where creative employees are free to create at their own pace, may thrive and become a highly valuable contributor. So difficulties with employees can be shaped by the working environment, as well as by the particular personality traits of the employee and others with whom he or she works.

Just as bad bosses are determined by subjective measures—what employees think about them—so, too, are difficult employees, in this case by what their boss and other employees think about them. In turn, there are different strategies for dealing with these different types of difficult employees. The optimum approach depends not only on the type of difficulty, but also on the interplay of personalities, politics, systems, and structure in the workplace.

In this book, you'll encounter all sorts of difficult employees, some with multiple reasons for being difficult. For example, here are some of those you'll meet: the bully, the know-it-all, the busybody and gossip, the backstabber, the incompetent, the sensitive soul, the emotional wreck, the slow poke, and the poor communicator. You may find some of these many different types in your own office.

You'll also learn a series of tools for making the best of a difficult situation. Depending on the situation, you might do more training or assign a mentor, provide a warning, assign more or fewer tasks, observe and monitor, transfer or demote, dock the employee's pay, or ultimately fire the bad employee.

A Survival Guide for Managing Employees from Hell is designed to help you identify the different types of bad employees and decide what to do about them. As in the previous books in this series—*A Survival Guide for Working with Bad Bosses* and *A Survival Guide for Working with Humans*—it draws on real-life stories. I've learned of these tales—and many others—in the course of consulting, conducting workshops and seminars, writing columns and books, being an exhibitor at conventions, and just talking to people about their experiences in the workplace.

Each chapter uses a mix of problem-solving and conflict-resolution techniques, along with methods such as visualization, analytical reasoning, and intuitive assessment—and a strong dose of using your own common sense.

In general, you'll find that being open and honest and straight-

forward where you can be is often the best policy. Doing so creates a good foundation for trust and predictability that helps employees know what's required, expected, and where they stand. Your goal should always be to find a balanced solution that will allow for the greatest success. That means you need to figure out what is causing an employee to be difficult and what actions are most likely to lead to improvements if possible, while keeping in mind that not every difficult employee will respond to even the best of strategies. In those cases, the optimum solution is to diplomatically let the employee go. You will help the employee save face and reduce the potential for workplace disruptions, as well as for potential legal or other repercussions from a disgruntled ex-employee.

Whatever the situation, it's important to recognize that no one approach or solution fits all, just as in dealing with any type of workplace problem. You have to adapt your options not only to the situation, but to your own style and personality, as well as that of the employee. You also have to consider if this is an isolated case of one difficult employee—one bad apple in the barrel—or whether the problem involves others, such as when two or more employees are creating a problem because of what happens when they work together. This can make a difference in whether to seek a group or an individual solution, or even make some systematic or structural changes in the workplace. Also, different principles, strategies, and tactics will work best for you at different times, based on what's happening at the company and whether you are the top boss or you have other executives above you.

Consider these chapters to be like a catalog of different tools for dealing with different types of difficult employees. In keeping with this catalog approach, each chapter features the following tools:

- An introductory paragraph highlighting the difficulty.
- A short story about one or more owners or managers who faced this type of employee. The stories are real, but the identities, companies, and employee names have been changed to protect the guilty—and the innocent.
- A quiz with a list of possible responses so you can think about what you might do in a given situation. You can even use this as a management training exercise or game to discuss this issue with others and compare your responses.

- A discussion of how these owners or managers chose to respond to their difficult employee or how they might respond.
- A series of three or more take-aways to highlight the chapter's key points.

As you read about how other people have dealt with difficult employees, you might think about how you can apply these strategies yourself or use them to advise a friend or associate with a difficult employee.

I hope you enjoy this survival guide, and I hope it helps you improve your situation at work. Read on and meet the many different kinds of difficult employees, some of whom might seem like ornery animals disrupting your carefully coordinated office zoo. Feel free to explore and visit these different employees in any order, and as you do, think about what you can learn about how to deal with your own difficult employee or employees. Think of yourself as the zookeeper. The better you learn to deal with the animals that become hard to handle, the happier and more productive everyone at the zoo will be.

If you have your own questions, feel free to visit the section of the website devoted to this book at www.workingwithhumans.com/difficultheemployees and send them to me.