

Reducing Conflict 45 Adopt Problem People

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



Managing problem people is an art that can be very complicated and frustrating. Most managers recognize that they are spending an inordinate amount of time with a few problem employees. The Pareto principle applies in this instance: usually, 20% of the people will require 80% of a manager's attention.

Problem people are a distraction

When you have problem people on the team it is a great distraction. It prevents you from spending time on the strategy or on reinforcing people who are doing good work. I found a technique that helped me convert some of the more difficult workers into superstars.

Adopt the difficult cases

The idea is to select one or two of the most difficult cases and "adopt" them. Don't tell them you are doing this; just start operating in a different way. The first thing to do is decide which of the problem people are worth saving. You will not be successful at saving them all, but by using this technique you can convert around 50% of the difficult cases. That progress can be a huge benefit to your effectiveness.

Real example

Ruth was a caustic employee in one of the departments reporting to me. She once told her manager, "You've got no right to be in business." Ruth was an informal leader of the people on her shift because she was witty and quick. People listened to her, which was bad news for the manager because she was spreading negativity. I saw great potential in Ruth if she could change her attitude. I genuinely liked her despite the rough exterior and acid tongue. She had strengths, but there were too many rough edges.

I started getting to know Ruth a lot better. I found out about her unique set of needs and opinions. After a while, I started to understand what made her tick. I made it a point to drop into the break room almost daily before the start of her shift. I would sit with her group and just listen. At first, it was awkward, but they tolerated me and soon they actually welcomed me to their table.

The root cause of the problem

It turns out that the reason Ruth was acting out was severe racial abuse by her prior manager. The scars left her skeptical of all people in management.

I started improving the relationship with Ruth by asking her opinion. I encouraged her manager to listen openly to her ideas. Look for the insight they might provide instead of rejecting anything that came out of her mouth. Ruth started to turn and soften the rhetoric because she felt more respected.

Recognizing the opportunity

We were now in a position to take the next step. We asked Ruth to head up a planning group for a new packaging line. Her natural leadership showed in this effort. She was able to quickly get the cooperation of the operators and maintenance people. The job turned out to be a big success. We brought in top management and let Ruth tell how the job finished early and under budget. Top managers were impressed and said so.

Building on success

Having a success to build on, we took a further risk and appointed Ruth to a supervisory position. We also sent her for some excellent leadership training. She was excited to see these moves because there was real upward momentum in her career. It was something she never dreamed would happen. She was making more money and having greater influence in the business. At the same time, the negativity was melting away. Gone was the caustic sarcasm that was her trademark for years before. She was a strong advocate for the management side of contemplated actions.

Ruth ended up retiring as a very successful supervisor. If she had stayed on, I was considering making her a department manager, she was that strong and effective. The best part is that she felt better about herself and what she had accomplished in her career.

Conclusion

Recognize that you cannot save all individuals who are problem employees. You can, however, change some of them. They can go from a drain or negative influence on the environment to a very positive, even stellar, performer. Imagine the power of taking people who are a drag on performance and making them into your superstars. That is well worth the effort.

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