

Best intervention involves approaching from a position of helpfulness

Dealing with a 'difficult' employee

It needs to be made explicit what behaviour is tolerated

BY REBECCA WALBERG

It's no secret that a minority of employees tends to take up the majority of a manager's time. However, an article published in the journal *Industrial Relations* (Berkeley) may help to explain why. According to the study, an estimated 18% of men and 16% of women have personality disorders. These challenging people don't meet the clinical definition of mental illness but, left to fester, their behaviours can cause workplace conflict, drama and wasted time and energy.

If, of course, the employee's behaviour has crossed the line from unpleasant to abusive — sexual harassment, for example — it becomes a legal rather than management issue, and should be handled accordingly. But even difficult workers who stay on the right side of that line can be extremely stressful for supervisors — perhaps more so, because they can be harder to get rid of. This is because handling difficult employees is a particular skill, and it's an area in which many managers could improve.

"A lot of people who are hard to work with, or hard to

be around, are simply clueless," says Roxi Hewertson, a human resources and leadership consultant and teacher at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labour Relations. "If they lack self-awareness, or they don't have much emotional intelligence, then they don't realize that their actions are disrupting or upsetting others."

Intervening with such an employee requires approaching them from a perspective of helpfulness, she says. A confrontational discussion makes it more likely that conflict, not change, will result. On the other hand, a conversation about specific problems and their solutions that stresses future improvement, not blame for the status quo, can kick off a process of self-examination. Ultimately, this can lead to greater harmony and productivity, says Ms. Hewertson — the kind of win-win that should always be the goal of conflict resolution.

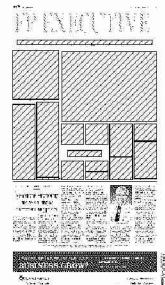
While managing root causes of difficult workplace behaviour is a good long-term goal, there are often issues that need to be dealt with, if not resolved, immediately.

"At the most basic level, difficult employees stand

out from 'normal' people by making life harder at work, and doing things you don't want them to do," says Steve Appelbaum, a professor of management at Concordia's John Molson School of Business in Montreal. "And when you're the manager, it's your job to stop it. And when I'm helping clients who complain about an impossible employee, I tell them there are four options."

The first option, to which most people default, is to do nothing. The appeal of this approach is that it avoids conflict, but it lets the problem persist. The second approach is to quit, which Mr. Appelbaum has seen happen, and the third is to change your attitude toward the problem. The fourth option is the only practical choice for improving the workplace dynamic.

"The only way to change another person's behaviour is to change your behaviour toward them," he says. "That means you're signalling that their behaviour won't get them what they want, and there will be consequences if they persist." Mr. Appelbaum compares it to raising children, in that rewarding bad



behaviour, even if the reward comes in the form of negative attention, assures more such behaviour. “For the first time, when you change your response, you are managing the relationship, and not the difficult person.”

Robert Sutton, a Stanford University management professor and author of *The No Asshole Rule* (2010), is more stringent in his approach. He makes the case for adjusting hiring practices, HR policies and compensation structures to prevent your workplace from becoming toxic in the first place — in part by firing those with dysfunctional personalities as soon as their

tendencies surface.

“The best example of this is Netflix,” says Mr Sutton. “They pay much higher than anybody else, and they are upfront that they expect that you are socially competent and the best person they can get for the position. And if they get evidence to the contrary, they don’t try to fix the problem, they just fire you.”

Netflix CEO Reed Hastings is renowned for his progressive approach to human resources. In 2009, a 124-page PowerPoint titled “Netflix Culture: Freedom & Responsibility” went viral. The presentation emphasized the importance of de-

cent behaviour as well as professional competence, which it reinforces not only by swift termination of those who break the rules but also by extremely competitive rewards for those who perform well. The result is a workplace culture that is renowned for being positive, supportive and efficient.

Ms. Hewertson agrees that ultimately civil behaviour is more likely in a civil culture. “It needs to be made explicit what behaviour is tolerated — and, better, encouraged — and what behaviour has no place in the office.”

Financial Post



STEPHANE DE SAKUTIN / AFP / GETTY IMAGES

Netflix co-founder and chief executive officer Reed Hastings is renowned for his progressive approach to human resources. Hastings places good behaviour at a premium, swiftly terminating those who don’t comply and rewarding those who do.