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Crabs, Cranks, and Curmudgeons: How to Manage Difficult People

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Crabs, Cranks, and Curmudgeons: How to Manage Difficult People

THE SIGNS are everywhere: voices raised in the conference room, hushed conversations in the hall, closed-door complaints from employees on your team. One of the other people in the group—yes, *one of the smartest, most highly skilled people you have*—is a pain. A troublemaker. Someone who aggravates everybody and pleases nobody. Managers have always had to deal with problem employees, but in today's labor market you may not be able to boot your talented-but-difficult curmudgeons out the door. So what do you do?

Some of the possible solutions are straightforward, though often overlooked. But if these are inadequate, you can turn to the practitioners of a new concept called *emotional intelligence* (EI) for help.

To begin, check whether the troublesome employee is in the wrong job. "Is the person mismatched for the role they're in, for the personality they have?" asks Thomas Rice, CEO of Interaction Associates, an international consulting firm based in Cambridge, Mass. "For example, often you'll find someone who is an introvert and a loner, maybe a highly intuitive kind of person who doesn't follow through administratively. Yet now they're expected to do all that kind of thing." This kind of mismatch occurs more frequently as technically skilled people are promoted into managerial roles, says F. Norris Dodge, president of H.R. Masters in Owings Mills, Md. "I'm finding people with low people skills now in people positions. The CPA or the analyst is now running the department. These are the very things that they were running away from—they wanted to work with numbers or

machines—and all of the sudden they're trying to create teams and foster teamwork, and they don't have a clue."

If this is the problem, get your curmudgeons some managerial training quickly—or transfer them to jobs that better use their skills.

Next, check whether the job itself requires them to be difficult. Some organizations have killer roles, positions that always seems to be occupied by cranks. Interaction's Rice gets suspicious whenever a person who zoomed from entry level to VP is now considered a pain in the butt. "I inquire into a bit of the history. What happened to the last person in this role—were they a pain in the butt too? 'Well, yeah.' And how about the one before that? 'Well, yeah, come to think of it, they didn't last too long...'" Clearly this person is doing someone else's dirty work. "They're usually covering for someone—the president or somebody like that," says Rice.

What to do? Live with it. Acknowledge that being difficult is part of what you are asking such people to do. Rotate them out of the position before they burn out and leave.

Assess the group dynamic, which may itself be the villain. Organizations that are growing fast—and those with a demanding performance environment—often develop a leadership vacuum. The vacuum lets one strong-minded person run roughshod over everyone else. "You can get a very talented person in that situation who can be terrible and vicious...because you have a very dysfunctional group

dynamic," says Rice. If that's the problem, make sure that every group includes at least one person with the personality or the clout to neutralize your prima donna.

Beyond organizational tinkering. These problems are organizational and can be solved relatively easily, provided you have the authority to make the necessary changes. But other problems are personal and interpersonal, the kind that are described in the catchphrases "personality clash," "bad chemistry," or "he rubs me the wrong way." Troublesome employees themselves may have difficult personalities. Or you, as the manager, may somehow be aggravating the situation by dint of your own personality rather than improving it. Whatever the specifics, emotional intelligence may hold the key to the solution.

The basics of this concept have been spelled out by Daniel Goleman, author of two books on the subject (see box). A person with high EI is self-aware, self-confident, and able to empathize with other people. He or she is also adept at communicating, leading, and developing others—skills that not every manager possesses in abundance.

You need to be aware of how people like that push your buttons.

"A lot of times [troublesome] people don't get better because their bosses don't have very much emotional intelligence in the way they manage them," says Cary Cherniss, a professor at Rutgers University's Center for Applied Psychology and director of the non-profit Emotional Intelligence Consortium, which is assembling a catalogue of best EI practices. "[Managers] need first of all to be aware of their own emotional responses and how people like that push their buttons. They have to be able to control their temper and their fear, depending upon what their situation is with that individual. They need to be confident and assertive in the way that they work with people like that—not intimidated or overwhelmed,

How to Manage Difficult People...

but at the same time empathic and diplomatic.”

What does this mean in practice? An emotionally intelligent manager might not try to change difficult employees' behavior directly, for example; instead, the manager would help employees understand the problems they're causing. “[Difficult] people...frequently are very low in self-awareness,” says Cherniss. “If they are made aware of the impact that they have, then often they'll change.” He cites the case of one overbearing, intimidating manager who kept claiming he was fine and didn't know why people were so upset. “Finally they videotaped him at a meeting—and when they showed him the videotape, tears came to his eyes. He just had no idea what he was like until he actually saw himself on the videotape.”

Another useful tool: 360° feedback, in which people's performance is assessed by everyone around them (see “Should You Use 360° Feedback for Performance Reviews?” *HMU*, February 1999). “It's often misused,” Cherniss says. “But when it's done as part of a development process, someone like an executive coach sits down with the individual and shares the information with that person in an emotionally intelligent way....It can be very powerful in motivating change.”

If acquiring these skills sounds daunting, the good news is that emotional intelligence can be learned. Minneapolis-based American Express Financial Advisors has been running an Emotional Competence training program for managers since 1992. A major goal is to help managers become “emotional coaches” for the people who report to

them. The training helps managers appreciate the role that emotion plays in the workplace and develop a greater awareness of their own emotional reactions. It includes training in self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skill. Interestingly, these soft skills translate into hard results. A recent study found that trained managers grew their businesses by an average of 18.1% compared to 16.2% for untrained managers. That came to an estimated \$247 million in increased revenue over the 15-month study period. Pam J. Smith, whose title is program manager for emotional competence, says that the company has also recorded greater retention and lower absenteeism as a result of the program.

No one is ever “sent” to the program, says Smith; it isn't used remedially. Even so, she adds, it can ease problems with difficult people by letting managers see where they themselves are causing or exacerbating the problems. Sometimes that's enough.

—CONSTANTINE VON HOFFMAN

Using Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence, writes Daniel Goleman, is “the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships.” People with high levels of emotional intelligence (EI) can deal with problem employees more easily—and can avoid becoming problem employees themselves.

So can EI be learned? Absolutely, says the author, but not through conventional assembly-line classroom techniques. Rather, the learning has to be tied to an individual's strengths and weaknesses—and has to be reinforced with changes in behavior over time. And it often works best if it's self-directed. For example, an accountant described by Goleman recognized that she tended to flare up in anger when criticized “and said things she felt ashamed about later.” Enrolled in an executive MBA program, she decided to confront her weakness head-on through a series of steps including:

Learning and mastering techniques “for better self-control, such as anticipating hot-button situations and preparing herself so that she won't ‘lose it.’” Reminding herself that most criticisms are actually “feedback that is meant to be helpful.”

Practicing and mentally rehearsing these responses as often as possible.

Role-playing difficult situations with fellow students so she could “try out new self-control strategies.”

Asking for reminders from a fellow team member, who agreed to signal her when he saw her “being stubborn, inflexible, or otherwise overreacting.”

Skills such as these, notes Goleman, are increasingly being taught in business schools—notably the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University, which designed an entire course to teach personal and emotional competencies.

If you want to learn more...

www.eiconsortium.org. Web site of the Emotional Intelligence Consortium includes research findings, books and articles, and future research plans. Also includes information on events, such as the first international conference and exposition on emotional intelligence (Chicago, September 27–29, 1999).

Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ by Daniel Goleman (1997, Bantam Books paperback, 352 pp., \$13.95, available through local and online bookstores)

Executive EQ: Emotional Intelligence in Leadership and Organization by Robert K. Cooper and Ayman Sawaf (1998, Perigee paperback, 368 pp., \$14.95, available through local and online bookstores)

Working with Emotional Intelligence by Daniel Goleman (1998, Bantam Books, 385 pp., \$25.95, available through local and online bookstores)