

Difficult Employee?

Michelle Allen and Tim Twigg



NO Problem!

As an employer it is safe to say that at one time or another (if not already) you will have to deal with a difficult employee. If you are one of the fortunate few who have not experienced this, then you probably have lent your ear to many a colleague, friend or family member, who has.

Some maybe you inherited when you bought or took over a practice, maybe you missed some signs of their true character when you interviewed them and/or you didn't do an adequate reference check to learn difficulties or problems experienced by previous employers. Now, here you are, feeling stuck.

Once you find yourself in one of these situations there are steps you can take to either correct the behavior or, if necessary, end the employee's employment on more positive terms. This means learning some basic management skills and gaining the confidence to proactively address the problems.

Negative Neal

Neal constantly complains about policies and procedures and when you make adjustments to your policies and/or procedures he complains about that too. He will openly let you know that your long-term employees don't do their jobs right and that the new employee you just hired doesn't have a clue. Overall his negative attitude is poisoning your practice.

Bullying Barbara

This employee asserts her will on everyone, even you. She manipulates every situation for her benefit by using condescending language and tone to make people uncomfortable and less likely to express their views, ideas or opinions. She may even carry herself physically in a way that seems threatening.

Over time you find this employee is controlling you and your practice, and your employees are scared to have an opposing opinion. Everyone is avoiding confrontation at all costs. A number of fantastic employees have resigned from your practice as a result and you realize your practice really is run by Bullying Barbara.

Know it All Al

This employee knows everything, at least he thinks he does, and he does not hesitate to tell you, his co-workers and your patients. He questions your decisions at every turn and does not have a problem publicly stating you are wrong in front of other employees and/or patients causing awkward and uncomfortable moments.

Better Late Than Never Lisa

This employee is late more often than she is on time. She always has a major emergency that just happens to come up right before she is due into work. Sometimes she will call in to announce that she is running late, and other times no one knows what has happened to her and she is surprised that you and your staff are upset that she is an hour late and did not even bother to call. You have talked with her on numerous occasions resulting in an immediate change that falls back to old habits within weeks.

I Will Come to Work When I Feel Like it Felix

This employee comes to work when it fits into his schedule and makes it clear that his personal life takes priority. He may or may not call in his absence and will work time off for doctor and personal appointments to maximize his time away from your office.

Initially his requests for time off and excuses for his absences seem legitimate, so you worked with him. Now that some time has passed you realize your staff completely resents him and wonders why you keep this guy around. His absences are causing patient care to go below your standards and you realize a change needs to be made immediately.

What is the best course of action when dealing with these types of difficult employees?

As you can see all of these personalities bring great challenges to any practice no matter how big or small--don't think these challenges will magically go away, they rarely do. The longer you wait to address these issues the more problematic each of these difficult employees becomes, at times creating mass destruction in their wake.

First, make sure "your house is in order." Namely, making sure your policy manual is current and up-to-date; having signed acknowledgements and employment agreements with each employee, and having comprehensive, up-to-date job descriptions for each employee and position, including essential duties and core attitudinal and performance competencies.

Your policies, coupled with the essential duties, core attitudinal and performance competencies on the job description, form the foundation, basis, reasoning and/or justification for counseling an employee regarding their job performance or poor behavior. These also support consistent, effective and fair staff management that is objective rather than subjective.

Second, ensure that you have appropriately and objectively documented the past poor job performance issues. Focus on performance-related issues, not the emotions that surround them. This may include supervisory notes describing your verbal remedial intervention and the employee's response or a formal performance evaluation.

Third, have a private meeting with the difficult employee and discuss how his/her attitude, behavior and/or comments are affecting your patients and the overall operation of your practice. Clearly explain your expectations, referencing your policies and the employee's job description as needed.

If appropriate, solicit solutions from the employee. Some employees may be more open to assisting with the solution than others. When employees are part of creating a solution to the area(s) of concern they tend to take more ownership of the situation which increases the chances for a change in their behavior.

Employees who are negative, confrontational or who like to bully do not always see themselves in this negative light. They may be resistant to what you have to say. This is not the time to back down, but rather the time to insist on change and, if applicable, giving them the course of action they should take to make that change.

What happens if the difficulties still persist? Then you meet again with your difficult employee taking a more formal approach through a written employee counseling memo. During the meeting, note that there has not been the necessary improvement needed to meet your expectations regarding attitudes, behaviors and/or comments. Once again use specific examples on the counseling memo and relate those examples to how their negative attitudes, behaviors, and/or comments are affecting your practice. This is also the time that you let your difficult employee know that if they choose not to make the necessary changes further disciplinary action, up to and including termination will follow.

By following the steps mentioned you not only give your difficult employee the opportunity to change, you also are documenting the legitimate, nondiscriminatory reasons for termination if your difficult employee does not heed your counseling and make the necessary changes to be a productive member of your team. Since difficult employees may be in a protected class (such as age, disability, religion, national origin or ethnicity), your documentation is key to supporting your decision for termination and keeping discrimination and/or wrongful termination claims at bay.

Do not be held captive by your difficult employee, take action and create a better working environment for yourself and your employees. No employee is indispensable especially one that is adversely affecting your practice. There are good employees out there waiting to be discovered.