



Working with Difficult Employees

Every preschool manager wishes his or her agency could be staffed exclusively with highly motivated, enthusiastic individuals who have flawless personalities. These employees would always be happy and satisfied; they'd never complain, become argumentative or make unreasonable demands. Teams would work effectively across classrooms, and conflicts between coworkers would be nonexistent.

Obviously, this ideal could never exist, nor would we want it to! The diversity of our employees, specifically their job skills, personalities and individual quirks, creates a workplace that is both interesting and stimulating. But on occasion, we encounter the truly "difficult" employee: someone whose personality, attitude, or approach to work and life is so skewed, it causes problems for you and your school.

Difficult employees are a huge drain on a program in terms of wasted time, reduced productivity, greater inefficiency, increased employee turnover and in extreme cases customer loss. Employees who work with difficult coworkers suffer from low morale, a declining commitment to their work, decreased job satisfaction and greater levels of stress and frustration. That's why it's so important for schools to understand what motivates difficult employees, and how to effectively manage them.

Types of Difficult Employees

Difficult employees usually fit into one or more of the following common personality categories:

- **Negative** - Pessimistic, cynical, unenthusiastic, un-cooperative
- **Martyr** - "Poor me" attitude, feels singled out, blames, induces guilt in others
- **Complaining/Whining** - Griping, oppositional, chronic malcontent
- **Know-It-All** - Superior attitude, arrogant, egotistical, never wrong
- **Passive-Aggressive** - Submissive, meek, silent, avoids conflict and responsibility
- **Hostile-Aggressive** - Pushy, demanding, argumentative, prone to abusive/violent behavior

In addition to these general personality traits, difficult people also use a number of manipulative behaviors on the job, including insubordination, refusal to complete assigned tasks, poor job performance, behind-the-back criticism of directors, coworkers or the organization, harassment, blaming of others and intimidation, to name just a few.



What Makes Someone "Difficult"?

Believe it or not, most difficult people are not born that way. While it's true that each of us enters this world with certain innate characteristics and personality types, the majority of our behaviors are learned through our interactions with others. Through trial-and-error, we exhibit a variety of behaviors that others around us either reward or punish. When our behaviors are rewarded, they are reinforced and we learn to repeat them. Thus, difficult people became that way simply because their negative behaviors were rewarded, instead of punished. And because over time these behaviors have been internalized and reinforced, difficult people truly believe the way they behave is acceptable and appropriate.

What motivates people to be difficult in the workplace? Primarily, difficult employees are driven by the need to control their environments. Robert Bacal, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Dealing with Difficult Employees*, says "...difficult people mainly use their conduct to control their situations and other people's reactions. Because people respond differently to the difficult person, the difficult person can manipulate, control and influence the reactions of those involved in the encounter. Even if bad things happen to difficult people, the payoff is that they have created the situation, and that gives them a sense of control."

Another motivation of difficult employees is their need to stir things up. Difficult employees thrive on the chaos they create, and go out of their way to push people's buttons. "These employees don't care whether they generate a positive reaction, like praise, or a negative reaction, like being yelled at," says Bacal. "They gain some level of psychological satisfaction and personal reward from either."

It's clear that difficult employees create a great deal of havoc in the workplace. Yet many schools refuse to address the problem. While they acknowledge the costs and burdens of these employees, many schools ignore the problem (hoping it will go away) or simply fail to act. But doing nothing only perpetuates the cycle, further reinforcing difficult employees' behaviors. The following are some techniques that will help directors and coworkers confront this challenging problem:

Techniques for Directors

The most important tool a director can use in addressing the difficult employee's problem behavior is *feedback*. Feedback is specific information provided to the employee that communicates how the employee's behavior is affecting the workplace. Feedback can be factual (based on observations of the employee's behavior and its resulting consequences) or emotional (based on how other people react to the employee's behavior). Ideally, both types of feedback should be shared with the employee in a feedback meeting.



Feedback should be presented in a non-confrontational, non-accusatory manner at a time when the employee receptive to hearing it. Don't schedule feedback meeting when the employee facing a deadline or clearly stressed or frustrated. Feedback should be specific and targeted at the behavior, rather than the person. For example, telling an employee he is too aggressive is not helpful. Instead, tell him the tone and volume of his voice and the way he talks to his coworkers is intimidating.

Balance the positive with the negative; highlight good behaviors and performance along with behaviors that need improvement. Ask the employee what he can do to change his behavior in the future, and close the meeting by summarizing the points discussed and ways the employee will work to improve his behavior.

In addition to feedback, it is vital for directors to communicate clear limits for the employee's behavior, along with the consequences that will occur if the behavior continues. For example, an employee who is prone to shouting profanities when angry should be told, "If you continue to swear when you are upset, you will be written up and suspended without pay." Once these limits are established, directors must follow through with the appropriate consequences whenever the inappropriate behavior occurs.

When All Else Fails: Disciplining Difficult Employees

Sometimes difficult employees are unwilling to change their behaviors. When this occurs, the director must use performance management to get the employee on track. A Performance Improvement Plan (attached) is an excellent tool that establishes in writing the director's expectations and goals for the employee. There are two main benefits of using a Performance Improvement Plan with a difficult employee. First, the plan clearly describes the performance and conduct that is expected of the employee, and outlines the steps the supervisor has already taken to help the employee improve. Second, it outlines the consequences that will occur if the improvement goals are not met. By using a Performance Improvement Plan, responsibility is shifted back onto the employee, who is expected to be an active participant in resolving his behavior problems.

Along with the Performance Improvement Plan, a director should be completing Employee Warning Records when an employee exhibits inappropriate behavior. The Warning Record should describe the employee's inappropriate conduct factually and objectively, and outline how the employee is expected to handle a similar situation in the future. For example, an employee exhibiting hostile-aggressive behavior would be written up as follows:

This morning, when I handed you your work assignments, you rolled your eyes at me, sighed, and threw the paperwork back on my desk. You began arguing with me about the work that was assigned to you, and you stated loudly and angrily in front of the other staff that you were "tired of being given all of the lousy jobs."



Your behavior is unacceptable because it is disrespectful and insubordinate, and violates the school's standards for performance and conduct. In the future, I expect that you will not voice your dissatisfaction in a rude and unprofessional manner, and that you will share any concerns you have about your work assignments with me privately. Your failure to conduct yourself in such a manner will result in further disciplinary action, up to and including termination.

At some point, a director may find that, despite her efforts, a difficult employee simply refuses to behave appropriately. In this situation, the school must decide if it is willing to put any more time and effort into turning the difficult employee around. If your documentation substantiates the employee's continued inability to improve his conduct, your school will be able to justify to legal counsel that termination is warranted and in the school's best interests.

Helpful Hints for Dealing with Difficult Coworkers

Nothing is more frustrating than having to constantly deal with difficult coworkers. They drain you of your time and energy, and encounters with them leave you frustrated, angry and stressed out. There are steps you can take, however, to better manage your interactions with them.

The first step in dealing with difficult coworkers is recognizing that while you can't change your difficult coworkers, you *can* change your reaction to them.

According to Bacal: "Annoying behaviors are truly in the eye of the beholder. That's why one person may be bothered by certain behaviors, and others are not. Our reactions to these behaviors come from within ourselves; they are based on our perception that the other person's behavior isn't consistent with what we'd do and we don't like that. Thus, their behaviors annoy us. But the reality is, no matter how much we'd like to, we can't 'fix' another person. What we can do is work at changing our reactions to someone who annoys or frustrates us."

Changing your reaction to a coworker's behavior can be accomplished by asking yourself the following questions:

- Is this person worth getting upset over?
- Is this person's behavior really destructive?
- Is this person's behavior truly affecting me, or am I just letting it affect me?
- Can I let this person's behavior go and move on?



In many situations, you will find that by changing your perception, you'll reduce your negative reactions to your coworkers' difficult, annoying behaviors.

At times when you find you are affected by difficult coworkers' behaviors, it is vital that you meet with them in a non-confrontational way to discuss and resolve the problem.

The *DUIRR- Technique* is a proactive, positive approach to dealing with difficult co-workers. In five steps, you can work through your annoyance and frustration with your co-workers while building your relationship with them.

Step 1: Determine your involvement. Determine if you are truly involved in this situation, and if so, to what level you are affected. Often, we find we are annoyed by others' behaviors that are not directed at us. In those situations, change your perception and reaction to the behavior, and let it go. If you are directly affected by the behavior, move on to Step #2.

Step 2: Understand the other person. When dealing with difficult people, it's easy to get caught up in the emotions of the moment. Instead, try to understand where they're coming from. Take a deep breath, and really listen. Do not interrupt or try to argue your position. Repeat back what was said to ensure you understand their perspective. Ask questions to clarify anything that is unclear.

Step 3: Influence his/her attitude. State specifically, in a non-confrontational way, how the behavior has affected you. Use "I-You" statements: "I feel humiliated when you yell at me in front of our coworkers"; "I cannot meet my deadline when you refuse to complete your part of the project on time." Do not try to place blame or find fault; rather, focus on preventing the problem from recurring in the future.

Step 4: Resolve the problem. Discuss the cause and effect of the problem behavior and ways to deal with it. Ask questions to get information, rather than just stating opinions. Remember, you can't change someone's personality, but you can adapt your reactions to it.

Step 5: Recover and go on. Once the problem behavior is addressed, don't hold a grudge. Let the incident go and move on. Dwelling on it will only increase your levels of stress and frustration.

Dealing with difficult people in the workplace is not as hopeless as it seems. Through open, ongoing communication from directors and coworkers, difficult employees can, over time, learn more acceptable behaviors. While there is no single, simple remedy, the techniques described above will go a long way in helping your agency overcome this challenging problem.



Early Care and Education Training and Consulting Performance Improvement Plan

Date: September 17, 2007

To: John Doe, Toddler Teacher
From: Timothy Smith, Program Director
Re: PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Since July, we have had several discussions regarding your conduct. Specifically, we met on July 26, August 17, August 28 and September 9, 2002, to discuss how your angry outbursts, where you raise your voice, make intimidating comments and swear at your coworkers, have negatively affected the workplace. On August 28 and September 9, you were given written warnings for this behavior. We discussed the issues below and I pointed out the severity of these issues and the need for you to correct them immediately. Specifically, we discussed the following:

- Raising of your voice and swearing at your coworkers when you are angry.
- Stating of intimidating comments towards your coworkers when you are angry.

Since our discussion on September 9, 2007, the above concerns have not improved significantly. We are, therefore, faced with a serious issue and must place you on a Performance Improvement Plan. During the next 60 days, you will be responsible for successfully meeting the following objectives and correcting the issues mentioned above or further disciplinary action, up to and including termination, will occur. You are expected to perform the following objectives throughout the entire 60-day period and throughout your tenure with the Early Care and Education Training and Consulting, starting today:

- You must immediately cease from raising your voice and swearing at your coworkers when you are angry.
- You must immediately cease from making intimidating comments towards your coworkers when you are angry.

Because you play an important role here, you must take the necessary steps to correct your behavior. I believe you are able to achieve these objectives and I will be working closely with you in an effort to ensure your success. As always, I will be available to coach and counsel you in any areas that you require. We will also meet weekly to review your progress.



Your signature below confirms your understanding of this document and our discussion and your agreement to meet the objectives outlined above.

Employee Signature Date

Supervisor Signature Date

cc: Employee Personnel File



Negative Aspects

Tips for Dealing with Negative Aspects in Others

- 1) When you see someone go into attack mode or excess defensiveness, recognize that it is useless to argue with them.
- 2) Realize that the person is feeling very insecure at that time.
- 3) Don't continue to push them because they will only get worse.
- 4) If the symptoms only seem to occur when the person is under stress, wait until another time to pursue the discussion.
- 5) If they are always overly defensive or always attacking others, you may need to find another person to work with who does not have the same problem.
- 6) Keep your own sense of self-confidence and don't allow yourself to be verbally abused.
- 7) If the difficult person is your boss, reconsider whether it's time to find a job elsewhere.

Tips for Supervising People with Negative Aspects

1. Help the person see how much their negative behavior is damaging their career potential.
2. Set goals for them to learn to work better with others and monitor their behavior until it improves.
3. If it does not improve within a reasonable time, send them packing.



Tips for Overcoming Negative Aspects in Yourself

1. Learn to recognize when your defensive mechanisms come up. Realize that you are probably not really being attacked.
2. When you catch yourself feeling defensive, don't react so quickly.
3. Learn how to listen when someone asks a question or makes a suggestion.
4. Ask people to re-state their question/comment/suggestion.
5. Try to understand what others are saying by repeating back what you think you heard.
6. You may want to ask for more time to respond, then, get back to them. This will give you time to work with the question/comment/suggestion without the pressure of being on the spot.
7. Do consider that other people have good ideas that are just as valid as yours.
8. Take courses or workshops in listening skills and teambuilding.
9. Find someone who can help you work on this negative aspect of yourself — a good friend, coworker, teacher or counselor.
10. If it is someone that you interact with regularly, ask them to let you know when you are being a jerk and call your attention to what you are doing. That will help you learn to see what situations and events trigger your insecurity.
11. Recognize that changing learned patterns of insecurity and defensiveness may take years of work.
12. Don't give up on yourself.
13. Learn to understand your own personality and your unique strengths and weaknesses.
14. The effort to improve your ability to get along with others will be rewarded as you find more career opportunities open up for you.

*Would you like to receive two clock hours of management training for reading
"Working with Difficult Employees"?
If so, complete the worksheet at
www.tymthetrainer.com/onlinetraining.html
and follow the instructions.
A two-hour management training certificate will be provided.*