10 Effective Tips for Managing Difficult People

“Regarding managing difficult people, as far as the courts are concerned, if it isn’t written down, it’s as if it didn’t happen.”
– Colleen Kettenhofen

Many managers and supervisors are promoted to management positions based on their “hard skills.” Yet few of them have had training in the area of managing people – especially managing difficult people. In conducting workshops on managing people, one of the biggest challenges managers and supervisors face nowadays is how do you manage a difficult employee? You can’t control them, but you can control their environment in the hopes of coaching the employee to better performance.

Here are ten effective tips for managing difficult people:

1. Document, document, document. As far as the courts are concerned, if it isn’t written down, it’s as if it didn’t happen. Even if you have a prospective employee sign a form saying they know they can be terminated at any time, without cause, and without warning or reason. You never want to terminate without proper documentation. Terminating an employee without cause, reason, or prior warning can make it easier for the difficult person to win a wrongful termination lawsuit.

2. Document training and coaching. Any type of training you provide for your difficult employee is considered coaching. In managing difficult employees, many people assume that the documentation you’re doing is to build a case for termination. It is not! It’s really to show everything you did to try and salvage the difficult employee. And this includes any and all training—whether you trained the employee, someone else trained them, or you sent them to a seminar to be coached to better performance. All of it is considered coaching and training.

3. Avoid the word “attitude.” In managing difficult people, why would you want to avoid saying something like, “Pat, I don’t like your attitude?” Because it’s too subjective. It’s nebulous. It’s not specific enough.
Remember, be objective, not subjective. Focus on facts. Attack the problem, not the difficult person. Attack the behavior, not the person.

Focus instead on specific behaviors or their quality of work. So, for example, what do you do if every time you delegate a special project to the difficult person, they fold their arms, exhale loudly, roll their eyes, and sarcastically mutter under their breath, “Okay, whatever?!”. You would want to say in a low, controlled tone something like, “Pat, every time I delegate a special project to you, the arms are folded, you’re rolling your eyes, muttering under your breath, ‘Okay, whatever.’ What seems to be the cause of this?” Notice I listed specific behaviors. So stick with facts.

Be objective, not subjective. Focus on facts. As mentioned, when managing difficult people, be objective by mentioning specific behaviors, or specific declines in the quality of their work. For example, when documenting the employee’s “attitude,” you might document the following: “Every time I delegated a special project to Pat So-and-so, he/she would fold his/her arms, exhale loudly, roll his/her eyes, and mutter under his/her breath, ‘Okay, whatever!’” Now, if this were ever read by a jury, or your Human Resources department if you have one, or your manager, they would have a clear picture of this person’s attitude.

“When managing difficult people, it’s imperative that you make their goals and objectives measurable, specific, quantifiable, and in writing for accountability.”

Provide specific examples of what you want, in behavior or quality of work. Put it in writing for accountability. When managing difficult people, it’s imperative that as their manager or supervisor, you’re making their goals and objectives clear.

For example, if they’re doing clerical work, they are to “Correct and proofread all required reports for the quality control department.” Or if they’re in customer service, an example of a measurable, quantifiable, specific goal would be that they are to “Respond to all customer complaints within 48 hours of receiving them.” If they’re in manufacturing, they are to “Produce 35 percent more wingbats by December 15 of this year.” You get the idea.

Be aware of how you present yourself. When managing difficult people, remember, you are their role model. Be aware of your eye contact. Typically look at the person for two to five seconds. You don’t want to stare at them bug-eyed! But you also don’t want to avoid looking at them, either, because you’ll come across as too passive, too wishy-washy. They’ll sense you’re fearful of confrontation.

Having lots of eye contact can be difficult for some people because in some cultures, children are brought up that it’s disrespectful to have eye contact with their elders. These habits can be difficult to unlearn.

Also, watch your tone of voice. Use a low, controlled tone. Be aware of your body language, too. Studies
repeatedly show that fully 93 percent of what people notice and believe about you in face-to-face communication is based on your tone and body language. Tone accounts for 38 percent, and body language a full 55 percent.

Be very clear and concise in spelling out the consequences of what could happen if they don’t improve. For example, if this is a verbal warning, you might say to the employee, “You know our policy here, and right now this is a verbal warning. As it says in our handbook, if there isn’t sustainable and maintained improvement including and beyond the next 30 days, it could result in further disciplinary action. Or, it could even result in termination.”

In managing difficult people, one of the golden rules is you don’t want the employee to ever be able to say that they “weren’t warned.” Or, “I didn’t know. You didn’t tell me that.”

Get at the root cause of what is causing the employee to be difficult in the first place. For example, do they simply not like their job? Would they rather be in a different department? Are there personal issues going on with the difficult person that you need to know about? While it’s not your business to know what they do outside of work, it is your business if it’s something that’s affecting their work performance.

You can simply say to the difficult person, “Is everything okay? Is there anything going on that I need to know about? Because this drop in performance just doesn’t seem like you. As your manager/supervisor, I want to see you succeed. And I’ve noticed a real decline in the quality of your work, for example, ...” Then, give very specific examples. Remember, be objective, not subjective. Focus on facts. Attack the problem, not the difficult person. Attack the behavior, not the person.

In managing difficult people, a lot of this is common sense. Yet, as mentioned earlier, most managers, supervisors, and team leaders are promoted to leadership positions based on the fact that they were doing a great job. But that doesn’t mean they know instinctively how best to deal with difficult people.

Have follow-up performance-related meetings with the difficult employee. Two reasons for this: First, it’s what the courts want to see. Second, it does the employee a great disservice if they make a big turnaround and you don’t acknowledge it. Set a date and a time – in writing – for when you and the difficult person are going to meet again. And do meet! According to research, one of the main reasons employee improvement plans fail is lack of follow-up on the part of the manager. “When managing difficult people, most of us know what to do.

We just don’t always ‘do’ with what we know.”

Colleen Kettenhofen is a dynamic speaker, author, and workplace expert, having presented over 1,000 programs in 47 states and six countries. Popular topics include leadership, management, difficult people, and public speaking. She is co-author of The Master of Success, as featured on NBC’s Today Show. Colleen is available for keynotes, breakout sessions, and seminars. Contact Colleen at colleen@colleenspeaks.com or visit www.ColleenSpeaks.com.