Learn How to Manage Difficult People

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Abstract

All managers, at one time or another, are faced with office breakdowns resulting from disgruntled employees, unhappy customers, low morale and time management issues. While breakdowns and crises in the workplace will happen, it is possible to be proactive in managing them. Managers are expected to manage departments, staff and teams in order to meet the goals and objectives of their organizations. When these goals are not met, there are reasons why, and often the blame is placed on human performance issues. Have you ever found yourself thinking, "Jim is constantly undermining me during staff meetings" or "Sally is a great worker, but she is inconsistent?"

In this article, readers will learn strategies to manage difficult employees and breakdown in the workplace. We discuss prevention through identifying the causes of breakdowns and crises in the workplace. We also address effective communication strategies. The language used in the workplace sets a standard of how people will treat their colleagues, customers and themselves. It is also true that the language used in the workplace teaches others how to treat us. Finally, we discuss how to empower your employees in order to maintain a cohesive working environment. Your employees, when embodied in empowerment, will feel heard, know that they are valued and will be less likely to leave.

For the purpose of this article, ther term breakdown will refer to poor customer service, high-employee turnover, low-employee satisfaction, decreased productivity and crisis in

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the workplace. We are going to consider that any breakdown at work or otherwise comes from a misunderstanding related to poor communication and a lack of effective systems being put in place. Effective systems come from clear and effective communication. All managers, at one time or another, are faced with office breakdowns resulting from disgruntled employees, unhappy customers, low morale and time management issues. While breakdowns and crises in the workplace will happen, it is possible to be proactive in managing them.

Identifying the Causes of Breakdown and Crisis in the Workplace

The next time you look into the mirror, consider that you are looking at the one person you actually have control over, and that can be the most difficult person you will ever have to deal with and manage. Many people spend a great deal of time hoping problems will go away, avoiding very real issues that will only become worse if left unattended. Often managers wait, wanting others to change for their own personal satisfaction, but, in my experience, that gets us nowhere. When you understand that you can actually be the difficult one, you can then strive to become a stronger leader who your employees want to talk to and perform for.

If your team is not performing the way you want them to, you can start by addressing your part in the scenario. Consider the possibility that anyone who seems difficult is a teacher offering lessons in leadership. Consider that a shift in your consciousness around managing the "human resources" assigned to your team and changing your reactions to the "difficult people" are the breakthroughs that will lead to increased employee productivity, decreased turnover and enhancement of both employee and customer satisfaction.

Table 1: Possible Causes of Workplace Breakdown

Breakdown in the workplace is solvable when the underlying causes are addressed. The first step in solving a breakdown is to identify the root issue(s). Once it is clear what the cause is then solutions can be put in place. Possible root issues could include:

- Avoidance;
- Blaming others for the breakdown/lack of self-responsibility;
- Fear of punishment;
- Problem and obstacle focused;
- Misunderstanding;
- Labels;
- Lack of support;
- Inconsistency;
- Lack of company resources, including policies and procedures; and
- Not utilizing company resources, including policies and procedures.

Effective leaders see people for who they are instead of just watching what they do. Any behavior that is not contributing positively to increased productivity is a coping skill or learned behavior. People tend to utilize the strategies they know, especially in situations where they feel they could be punished or may get in trouble. When people fear punishment, they often feel threatened. In threatening situations, people go to fear, anger, blame and defensiveness. All of these coping strategies can lead to breakdown (see Table 1). It is common for mangers to label individuals behaving in these manners based on the choices they have made. For example, if Gina is late to work on a regular basis, she is labeled as lazy by her co-workers. What if Gina is a single mother of five just trying to stay afloat? She's not lazy; she's actually more like superwoman just trying not to fall apart.

Make sure your employees have the support they need to be successful. When breakdowns are happening, it is likely that your employees do not have what they need to get the job done. Save yourself time by using the resources that are already in place and available to you. You already have systems in place, but are you using them consistently? Do you know your organization's policies, procedures and protocols, and do you follow them to the letter? When we do not use the resources that are readily available, we create more work for everyone in the long run. Consistency is essential to preventing breakdowns and crises in the workplace. Being consistent means following through on what you said you would do. When you do not follow through, it teaches people not to take you seriously. When you consistently follow through and are consistent, your employees are set up for success.

Effective Communication Strategies

The language used in the workplace sets a standard of how people will treat their colleagues, customers and themselves. It is also true that the language used in the workplace teaches others how to treat us. When we do not speak up and stand up for ourselves, or what I call being a doormat, it teaches people in the office that we can be taken advantage of. When we become forceful and aggressive at work, or what I call being a bulldozer, we teach people to be careful of what they say and how they say it out of fear of what may happen.

Bulldozer and doormat communication styles are ineffective, and I caution you to avoid them. In my experience, both are detrimental to productivity and satisfaction at work, but, most of all, they are detrimental to preserving relationships. Both bulldozer and doormat communication leave people feeling powerless and result in a breakdown, power struggle or a blow up. In either case, both the bulldozer and the doormat require others to change for their satisfaction

to be achieved. Even worse, too often these types of communicators expect others to know what they need without directly communicating their own needs, wants and solutions. Of course, these efforts are fruitless and oftentimes result in the bulldozer and doormat communicators feeling powerless and disempowered, which then leads to an office breakdown. Disempowered employees experience more crisis, breakdown, higher turnover, poor productivity, poor customer satisfaction and overall dissatisfaction in the workplace. A much more effective communication strategy is what I call authentic assertive communication.

Table 2: Authentic Assertive Communication

In authentic assertive communication, it is important to speak from one's own personal experience in a nonthreatening manner. Here are 10 examples of tips and one-liners that you can use to encourage solution focused conflict resolution:

1. Speak up! Conflict will not resolve itself.
2. Voice solutions and requests. Avoid focusing on the problems.
3. Speak about your experience, not the other person's.
4. Refrain from starting conversations with "you" messages and finger pointing.
5. Ask permission before starting a difficult conversation. Ask: "Is now a good time to talk? I have an idea; would you like to hear it? Would you like additional support or assistance?"
6. Identify and ask for what you want.
7. Thank them for sharing their opinions and invite them to offer their own solutions. Ask: "How would you solve this problem?"
8. Tell them what you appreciate about them. Say: "I appreciate your _____."
9. Let them know that your goals are aligned with their goals and that you want to see them be successful. Say: "I want to see you succeed at your goals. What do you need to succeed? How can I help? How can I support you?"
10. Own your experience through the use of "I" statements: I need, I want, I feel, I expect, I am experiencing, I am looking for, I require or I don't like this.

Authentic assertive communication (see Table 2) comes from an experience of feeling empowered. In this type of communication, people talk about their experience in a nonthreatening, non-blaming manner, asking for what they want. This form of communication requires no one to change or to have to do anything. Authentic assertive communication means being truthful and direct while communicating from an empowered place, which makes the person more relatable and more inviting to their employees. There is no good/bad or right/wrong thinking in this form of communication. The goal is for people to better understand one another. When we understand each other, we are more likely to work together remembering that our goals are the same.

You can either embrace or reject the real conflicts that show up in your workplace and in your life. I encourage you to welcome your disgruntled employee and demonstrate a willingness to resolve the conflict with them. Would you like to know directly from your employees what they need and are upset about before they communicate up the ladder to your superiors or, even worse, talk badly to your customers? Why not hear from your employees where they are seeing breakdowns? Knowledge is power, and no one knows better what is not working in your organization than your employees. When your employees are not satisfied, then ultimately productivity suffers. Allow communication so that you have a chance to resolve what is not working.

Once you have heard what your employees require for their best performance, you may or may not agree or have the ability to give them what they are requesting. In my experience, simply allowing the conversation resolves the issue the majority of the time. If not, you can strategically switch the focus to solutions that are possible after you have heard them out. Thank them for being honest and for their feedback. Be willing to negotiate as long as it takes for a satisfactory solution to be agreed upon.

How to Empower Your Employees

Table 3: Empowered Leadership Illustration

Empowered employees produce greater results. Leadership that empowers produces employees who are more fulfilled, more team oriented and more willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. To accomplish this goal, try the following:

- Listen to your employees;
- Reward only what you want;
- Have clear expectations;
- Have an open-door policy;
- Communicate using boundaries that explain what you want and offer clear consequences;
- Get resourceful and offer creative solutions and strategies to every problem;
- Enforce your policies and procedures;
- Ensure that your employees have the resources they need to be successful;
- See your employees as doing the best they can with the tools they have;
- Use the resources, policies and procedures that are already in place; and
- Consistently follow through and be your word.

Be willing to listen to what your employees have to say. I encourage you to become the leader your staff wants to work with. You can make it attractive for them to come to you with their problems and concerns. You can become an empowering leader who rewards only what you want instead of what you do not want. Keep in mind that people do what is most valuable to them 100 percent of the time (see Table 3). This can be difficult to admit, but we get more value out of what we are doing at any given moment verses what we talk about doing. As managers, a helpful strategy is to get real about what people are doing and understand that it is more valuable in that moment than anything else. Then it is important to look at why they feel this is more valuable. Once we know what is happening and why, we can support the employee in getting their need met in a way that better serves the goals of the organization.

Having company and managerial standards allow your employees to feel empowered because they will know what to expect from you. Standards are non-negotiable requirements. For example, you may have a standard that the workday starts at 8 a.m. and ends at 4:30 p.m. A standard is communicated, written out and understood by all parties involved. Invite people to work with you through communicating your standards with boundary setting. Boundaries allow people to take responsibility for their own experience in the relationship. In order to have boundaries, one must have standards. I define boundaries as the manger knowing his or her standards as well as offering solutions for how to get that particular goal regardless of what other people do. Boundaries also train people how to treat you the way that you want to be treated. Boundaries are not demands or intimidation. If the person is unwilling to work with you, then it is best that they move on anyway. Boundaries do not actually require anyone to change.

The first half of my boundary-setting formula is to know and communicate your standards clearly and directly. Leave no room for interpretation and say exactly what you mean so you can accomplish your goals. The second half of the formula is to know and clearly express solutions around how you will get what you want regardless of what other people do. This means that you come to the table with solutions that do not require anyone to change. Boundaries require you to rely on yourself and your policies and procedures to get your needs met instead of focusing on the other person to do what you wanted them to do boundaries allow you to focus on the goal and the task at hand. I encourage you to let go of having an attachment to things looking a certain way or focusing on how you will get what you want. Instead, get committed to the goal verses who will support you in achieving it. When you communicate in this way, you also empower your employees to do the same, which will teach you how to treat and lead them.

As the manager, you can get ahead of crises and breakdowns by enforcing your policies and protocols. Your

employees may not be willing to put differences aside and move forward. Let the ones go who are unwilling to resolve the issues. There is nothing that you as a manager can do to get people to change. Become relatable and approachable through authentic, assertive communication and you will see quickly who to keep on your team and who should be let go by following the proper channels. Become an empowered leader with creative problem-solving strategies. Results come from confidence and people owning and experiencing their personal power. I have seen employees inspired by managers who invite open communication with no threat of punishment. It is important to teach rather than intimidate or negatively reinforce. If you have tried communicating, given them a chance to speak up and looked at how you can better support them in being successful and you are still not getting results, let them go so you can create a team of people who know what to expect, know how to communicate and are coming to work empowered in order to produce maximum results.

Rebeccah Silence, owner of Inspired Results is a life coach, keynote speaker and corporate trainer, specializing in individual, relationship, family, life purpose and career coaching. Silence inspires others to transform their obstacles into results, through speaking engagements, corporate training, workshops and one on one coaching.