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How to avoid enabling unproductive behavior

A supervisor will always offer help to staff members in need. However, you should not help staff members when your “help” allows them to continue unproductive behavior, resulting in you or others consistently carrying their workload. It’s good if your “supervisor instinct” guides you to reach out and help an employee experiencing a problem. However, your enabling behaviors may have the opposite of its intended effect.

Below are two common problems supervisors face, and ways to avoid enabling the employee.

1. Giving people one more chance... then another and another

It is easy to give low performing staff member another chance if they are a nice person. However, you shouldn't make it a habit of repeatedly coming to someone's rescue. The employee shouldn't be able to escape the consequences of their problem behavior. When you enable problem behavior, such as missing deadlines, you permit employees to avoid consequences of their actions. Your tactics as a supervisor can cause difficulties with other coworkers if you reassign the low performing employees' responsibilities to coworkers. Alternatively, you cause yourself problems if you take on their work yourself.

Ignoring the program will likely earn a supervisor or organization a less than favorable reputation, because the problem employee's behavior will reduce productivity and morale. Often nice supervisors prefer to avoid confrontations, hoping the problem will go away. Unfortunately, it is more likely that the problems will continue and become more problematic and eventually result in a poor work culture for the organization. A manager's avoidance behavior is seldom productive.

2. Accepting the problem employees' justification

Often low performing employees will give a supervisor an alibi for their unproductive or disruptive behaviors. While managers can accept such an allowance—"I did not understand the assignment", "I have financial problems and feel overwhelmed" or "I have a great deal going on in my life"—the supervisor should inform employees that the behavior will not continue to be tolerated.

The supervisor can always suggest the employee meet with the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), a service available at no cost to the employee. The employee can use EAP services to gain insights to improve the work performance and address any personal concerns that may be impacting work performance.

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Often disciplinary action is described in your company's employee manual. If you are uncertain you should speak to Human Resources. As the manager/supervisor, you should also consult with your supervisor to obtain their support and advice in how to handle the situation.



A problem, such as a spouse's failing health or ongoing responsibilities at home as a caregiver for a disabled adult or child, are valid and often overwhelming life stressors. The supervisor may be aware of these real stressors but must avoid vindicating the poor work performance due to a consistent life stressor.

If the employee's poor behavior and their rationalizations continue, managers should take disciplinary action. Often disciplinary action is described in your company's employee manual. If you are uncertain you should speak to Human Resources. As the manager/supervisor, you should also consult with your supervisor to obtain their support and advice in how to handle the situation. At this juncture, you may want to call the EAP for additional consultation to obtain another perspective and further suggested solutions to address the behavior.

One behavior that employees frequently want supervisors to make allowance for is missing deadlines. Below is an example of how a supervisor engaged EAP to help with this common problem.

A supervisor had an employee continually missing deadlines due to the employee's own unproductive behavior. The employee was constantly distracted and shifting from one activity to another without finishing anything. To add to the problem, the employee would laugh as a way of minimizing low productivity. EAP coaching did not improve the employee's performance beyond a week after an EAP appointment. Finally, the supervisor gave the employee a month to complete a project that reasonably should have been completed in two weeks. With the support of the manager, Human Resources and EAP, the supervisor informed the employee that if the employee failed to complete the project by the deadline the employee would be subjected to further disciplinary action, including termination for cause. The supervisor became a bit of a nag and frequently reminded the employee of the deadline. With less than a week left before her deadline the employee asked for the supervisor's approval to attend a twenty hour workshop unrelated to the project. The supervisor correctly turned the employee down reminding them of the deadline. The employee became very defensive. When the deadline arrived and the work was far from completed, the employee resigned.

Working with an employee to resolve a problem is one of the reasons your EAP exists. When a supervisor changes their role to a supportive enabler the supervisor essentially accepts responsibility for the employee's poor performance and creates more stress on the supervisor and other employees.



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