Exercising leadership when faced with a challenging employee

What is a challenging employee from a managerial point of view? It’s someone who cannot be managed like other members of the team and who requires the manager to constantly adapt his way of managing him. The most common comment from managers is: “Why do I have to make an effort to change when he’s the one causing problems in the team?” If you maintain that attitude, I can assure you that the challenging employee will notice it and will give you more trouble than you ever imagined and seize opportunities to defy you. Your attitude toward such a person is a crucial determining factor. The first requirement on your part is to change your perception of the person. You will be more at ease in dealing with this type of employee if you can convince yourself that your challenging employee is there to:

- help you see the flaws and/or inconsistencies in your organization;
- improve procedures or other things in your organizational system;
- clarify roles and/or ambiguities;
- simply help you evolve in your role as a leader.

From your colleagues’ point of view, challenging employees are a source of disagreements, differences and opposition, sometimes leading to a difficult work climate, especially when the management exercised in their regard has been flexible or too often absent. They have learned, sometimes even encouraged, to “call the shots” in the workplace. Here are the top 5 winning strategies when faced with a challenging employee.

1. Stop taking it all personally!

Challenging employees have a tendency to seize on our faults, our vulnerabilities, and to exercise their power in order to destabilize us. One of the strategies I have
Masculine pronouns are used to simplify the text; they designate both women and men.

found useful when dealing with this type of intervention is to ask myself: “What if it wasn’t me who was the target…?” The more I think the person is not deliberately provoking me to “lose my cool,” the more I remain calm and the more my influence on his attitude and behaviour increases. That attitude is the cornerstone of all your interventions. Why? Because you will react less to what irritates you about the person and will thus create a space for the person to react other than with an inappropriate attitude or behaviour. Another phrase I repeat to myself before an intervention that I suspect will be difficult is: “What is this person going to teach me about me that I don’t already know?”

2. Which nerve is the challenging employee hitting?

To date, you have had a few talks with this employee. What reaction did he provoke? Which button did he push? The other day, I heard a manager say: “My challenging employee thinks I’m an unfair manager, but fairness is one of my most important values. I feel like I’m being forced to step outside my comfort zone in order to manage him.” That statement made me very uncomfortable. While it’s true that a challenging employee makes us constantly adapt our usual ways of communicating, interacting and managing, we must not go to the other extreme and no longer be ourselves. In fact, this manager had lost control, but a positive element of his statement is that it shows which nerve the employee hit to thwart him. Another aspect of the manager’s reaction confirms that his loss of control was the emotional charge expressed in his statement. When we can identify which nerve the employee is hitting, it is easier to no longer give him access, which helps us better control our emotional or defensive reactions that he capitalizes on provoking.

3. Collective action and a common strategy

Most of the time, this type of employee triggers several intervention levels in the workplace. The fact that this employee is good at quickly perceiving the flaws and vulnerabilities in the system has already been mentioned. A frequent vulnerability that I have observed in practically all workplaces is the difficulty the various parties, including Human Resources, have in getting together to define a common intervention strategy. Too often, the manager takes initiatives alone. When he acknowledges that he has serious problems, he consults Human Resources – too often when the situation has already become critical. An HR advisor will guide the manager in applying the appropriate rules and disciplinary measures. A second advisor (Health & Safety) may also be involved regarding the absenteeism caused by the problem. When the climate has become toxic and a grievance is on the point of being, or has already been filed, a third advisor or the person responsible for psychological harassment in the workplace may also intervene.

This example shows that several people were called on to intervene in managing this individual without there being any consultation on the approach. The first question to be asked is: “Who should ensure that an intervention strategy is drawn up and how will the various key players confer with each other about the actions to be taken?” The more tightly woven your intervention plan (leaving few escape holes), the more impact and control you will have over the desired modifications to the challenging employee’s behaviour and attitude.
The other significant advantage is that the manager will feel better equipped and much better aligned with the actions that he will have to take in the weeks or months to come. A coherent strategy will help prevent any possible loss of control.

4. **Immediately adopt the two most important managerial principles: Rigour and consistency**

Remember: It is important to be consistent and rigorous with people. Believe me, the slightest easing up will be noticed and you will be leaving an opening for your challenging employee to return to his old ways of behaving inappropriately. Aren’t these principles the measure of success in managing all human resources? I think so! Now, here’s what your challenging employee came to teach you: Your style of management had certain areas for improvement. If you act with rigour and consistency when faced with these situations, everyone will win. Your credibility capital will increase and your staff will show you their appreciation.

5. **Dare to affirm your leadership with courage by following-up and holding necessary meetings**

The greatest challenge is to free up time in your schedule to hold these meetings. Managers are overloaded, that’s for sure. But if you put off this type of intervention, sooner or later it will cost you more in time, effort and energy, let alone that you run an even greater risk of impairing the overall health of your organization. If the situation persists for some time, several meetings will be needed. Did you inherit a team where these problems were not resolved? Then you will have to roll up your sleeves and spend time fixing them.

During the turnaround period, it is important not to forget your committed employees, those who give their best and who generate a good work climate. You need to keep in touch with your productive people, tell them that you have things well in hand and that their contribution is greatly appreciated. When times get tough, remind yourself that you are taking care of irregularities for their sake. Your courage and leadership will be more than rewarded by the return of a better work climate. Of course, if you are holding these meetings, need I remind you that action has to follow? That you have to “walk the talk”!

Real leaders know how to make difficult decisions and they show courage when the situation so requires. They exercise PROACTIVE leadership. Don’t forget that in your role as leader, maintaining a good work climate is your responsibility. And on that note, I encourage you to rise to the challenge of managing challenging employees!!!

Enjoy!
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