

What Seems to be the Problem?

Despite careful pre-hire screening, 'problem' employees still happen. What's to do?

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By Joseph Arkin

Each employee is part of a team, and is expected to contribute to the overall objectives of the business. The employee who, for one reason or another, fails to satisfy his supervisors can become quite a problem and challenge to management.

Employment interviews are the best time to weed out those who show frequent job changes without valid reasons, a tendency to lie about their previous positions, and poor work records as disclosed by checking references.

Many contractors find it necessary to do more than interview and check references—they also use tests. The kind and type of tests depends on the skills expected of applicants.

Despite pre-employment safeguards, mistakes are bound to be made and persons hired who are troublesome.

A “trial” employment period should be provided wherein management can decide whether an employee is satisfactory.

In this probationary period, employees are trained, assigned specific duties, and allowed to become part of the work force. Immediate supervisors must evaluate employees in terms of adherence to training programs, aptitude, attitude, and performance.

Watch for employees who display indifference, apathy, inability to follow orders, attitudes of belligerence, or unsuitability for assigned tasks. Probation is when supervisors should try to correct problems. If the trouble is so deep-rooted that correction seems impossible, it is best to terminate employment while still on a trial basis.

Some new employees are slower learners than others, while some take longer to acquire manual skills. These persons need the understanding and patience of their supervisors during the time they are trying to prove themselves. Employees should be kept informed of their progress so they will be “let down” gently if the decision is made not to retain their services.

Robert McMurry, writing for the Small Business Administration, lists seven primary reasons for an employee being a problem:

Lack of skill. A trained employee's skill may have been sufficient when the company hired him, but didn't increase as the job grew. Not being able to perform the job as well as he'd like-or as well as he thinks the company expects-can do several things to an employee. It might, for example, make him indifferent to fellow workers.

Misplacement. Often employees become problems when in the wrong job. Perhaps an employee is selling, and failing miserably because he lacks self-reliance (the capacity to accept rejection without anxiety). He begins to feel people don't like him, and this causes him to act hostile toward them.

Lack of job structure. Without clear instructions in what they are to do, most employees become confused. When an employee wonders why he doesn't know his job, he might decide, "It's my fault, I didn't pay enough attention when he was explaining it." Or more likely, he will blame his employer—"That so and so never says what he wants, and then jumps on me when I do it wrong." Either conclusion damages his morale and tends to lower morale throughout the workforce.

Incompatibility. "I just can't get along with him," a worker says about his supervisor. And the supervisor says, "No matter how hard I try to understand him, he rubs me the wrong way." What causes friction between two persons, both of whom are conscientiously trying to cooperate? Some people call it "personality clash." But the important point is, beware of such incompatibility and realize there isn't much that can be done to change it.

Inadequate supervision. People begin to deteriorate when not kept busy at constructive tasks. They lose interest, become indifferent, and sometimes resentful. Closely related to this situation is inconsistent or capricious supervision—one day strict, the next day lax.

Emotional immaturity. Some employees have never completely grown up, and sometimes think and act like children. To a certain extent, everyone suffers from this. The difference between an emotionally immature person and normality is the latter has fewer emotional disturbances, and is often able to control them.

Physiological deterioration or poor

health. The human body changes constantly. Deterioration sets in early with some persons, later with others, but eventually with everyone. Sometimes it's sudden, as when an apparently healthy person suffers a heart attack. Or it may be gradual, as when an employee loses his hearing over several

what is required for their jobs, and keep them informed of these evaluations. Where employees are deficient a plan should be established to correct the shortcomings, perhaps by increased training.

sometimes employees will pass initial tests, but personal problems may later turn them into unsatisfactory employees. Supervisors must be able to recognize signs, offer sympathetic assistance, tactfully suggest seeing a physician, and have the sincere desire to help the employee correct the weakness.

However, proper discipline is required, and can not be neglected in the mistaken notion that more can be gained by "being friends." Most people want order, to know what is expected of them.

In some instances workers may be highly skilled, yet their work performance is unsatisfactory, often because they simply may be in the wrong job. Supervisors must be willing to part with highly skilled workers if their talents can be put to better use in another department.

The personnel office must establish means to settle grievances, transmit company policy to employees, and keep records of workers' performance and conduct.

Whatever steps are taken to set up a grievance board or committee, all decisions should emphasize constructive action, to avoid bias, to follow a procedural plan, to fully explore the facts, and to allow considerable leeway for participants to get at the truth.

People are not perfect, and hiring mistakes are going to be made. To help overcome this fact, management must motivate employees to be creative and imaginative, capable of selfdiscipline, to volunteer extra effort, make personal sacrifices for the good of the team, be loyal, and to want to do an honest day's work for an honest day's wages.

Perfection will never be achieved, but wanting to reach the goal of perfection can lead to more orderly procedures, and thus to a better and happier place in which to work.

THE PROBLEM EMPLOYEE: WARNING SIGNS

Problem	Manifestation
Lack of skill for job	Indifferent to fellow workers
Misplaced in wrong job	Feels people don't like him; may become hostile toward others
Incompatibility with boss	Friction, despite good intentions
Inadequate supervision	Deteriorates in job, loses interest, becomes indifferent and sometimes resentful
Emotional immaturity	Acts like child, often unable to control emotional disturbances
Physiological deterioration or poor health	May be sudden or gradual; person may become anxious and fearful

years. Often, the most difficult problem created by poor health is the anxiety it causes. For example, nature may repair an employee's damaged heart so it's almost as good as new, but he may never overcome his anxiety. His constant fear of another attack may turn him into a problem employee.

Proper supervision is the key for eliminating many troubles encountered in the management-labor area. When supervision is of high order, management ordinarily will have few "problem employees." Training and development of good supervisory personnel, and implementation of good management practices, are the surest way to avoid problem situations.

Supervisors must do more than merely instruct, train, oversee or chastise. They must develop teamwork, so each employee respects their authority, asks questions without fear, contributes ideas, develops responsibility and loyalty, and receives praise for work well done.

The word "communication" is bandied about so much, it has almost lost any real meaning. Yet, management must establish a system of handling employee relationships.

Compare employees' performance to