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Managing Employee “Attitude” Problems

by Paul Falcone

An employee with an attitude problem is a manager’s nightmare. When the problem is an entitlement mentality—evidenced by rolling eyeballs, sighs and antagonistic body language—it can drive managers crazy because stopping such “silent” behavior is difficult when employees so easily can deny there’s a problem. More often than not, supervisors tend to avoid confrontation associated with employees with bad attitudes because avoidance is the path of least resistance.

Still, feelings of resentment can linger, and all too often can result in other employees shunning and isolating the problem employee. Sometimes pent-up emotions result in a public shouting match when some proverbial “last straw” is reached. By then, the situation is out of control.

There is a better way—through verbal counseling, in which you simply demonstrate respect for your problem subordinate by handling matters behind closed doors. If that doesn’t work, document the employee’s actions in a written warning that has the teeth necessary to withstand legal challenges of unfairness or inappropriate use of managerial authority.

With this consistent, two-step approach, you will put a stop to aggravating and disrespectful behavior meant to challenge and undermine your supervisory authority.

Aim for a Verbal Agreement

The purpose of a face-to-face private meeting is to explain how you perceive the individual’s actions and how that perception makes you feel. The idea is to ask for help to solve the “perception” problem that exists and then to make a mutual commitment with the employee to hear the other side of the story and to improve the situation.

Whenever you deal with what you perceive to be an “attitude” problem, it’s best to avoid the word “attitude.” It’s simply too inflammatory a word and typically escalates disagreement by fostering feelings of resentment and anger. It’s also subjective; courts have interpreted “attitude problems” as mere differences of opinion or personality conflicts. In court, only behaviors and actions that can be observed and documented can be presented as evidence. Therefore, refer to “conduct” or “behavior” when addressing the issue of unacceptable “attitude.”

Sometimes the best remedy for curing an attitude problem is good, old-fashioned guilt, not anger. Anger is external and forces people to look beyond themselves for fault. That’s why employees typically blame others when they are the recipients of a manager’s attacks. Guilt, on the other hand, is internal; it forces people to look at their own actions to see why others feel hurt by them.

Using statements like: “You make me feel...” and “How would you feel if... .” help to invoke feelings of guilt in others. Feelings aren’t right or wrong; they just are. When combining such phrases with an opening statement like “There’s a perception problem here,” employees are usually much more willing to hear your side of the story objectively.

After all, there are two sides to every story, and employees typically won’t deny that there is a perception problem. What they often want, however, is to be heard and to gain your attention as their manager. Therefore, seize this opportunity to fix the problem verbally by declaring a truce

and listening with an objective ear.

Document Progressive Discipline

If the problem continues after your face-to-face meeting, you should document your concerns in a written warning to the employee. Written records should describe the employee's actions in objective terms and spell out your expectations of how the individual should handle the situation if another disagreement occurs. In addition, *they should outline the consequences of inaction should the employee violate the terms of the warning.*

The key to well-written documentation lies in describing the employee's actions accurately so that your documentation remains clear enough to convince a jury that you had cause to discipline or terminate. Whenever possible, quote the employee's exact words in your documentation. Here are some examples:

"When I asked you where your equipment was, you walked up to me, stood approximately two inches away from me and stated that you were 'annoyed' that I was asking you about the location of your equipment. You raised your voice, using an inappropriate and disrespectful tone, and I perceived that you were trying to intimidate me.

"When I requested the claim file in question, you slid it across the desk and all of its contents fell out of the folder and onto the floor. Although you apologized for throwing the document by saying, 'Oh, sorry,' as it fell off the desk and onto the floor, you rolled your eyes and sighed as if you were annoyed by my request. Your actions were clearly insubordinate.

"When John asked you why you appeared to be so upset over a simple request, you pointed your finger at him and waved it back and forth, shouting, 'Don't tell me how upset I am! You don't know me, and you have no right to judge me!' Such actions were clearly inappropriate and unprofessional and violated company standards of performance and conduct."

Remember, while conduct infractions are sometimes the most difficult to quantify, they also are the most detrimental to department morale. Whenever you feel as if disrespectful, belligerent employees are holding you hostage, put the brakes on their actions without escalating emotions.