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Dealing with the prickly ones

By Amanda Kramer

Q. What's the best way for a supervisor to handle an employee who doesn't seem to respond well to constructive criticism? Advertisement

A. It could possibly be the thorn in the side of every supervising manager or human resources professional -- employees who need some serious advice regarding their performance, but they're highly resistant to listening.

If this is an employee who is consistently causing problems, you may want to rethink that person's tenure at the company. However, if this is a person who is worth saving, there are ways to work around the problems, according to one local expert.

"Employees that are stubborn, defensive, angry? Yeah, that's the name of the game in my world," said Karen Ostrov, founder of Konect Consult-ing. Ostrov, who has a background in psychology, works with businesses to help improve managers' leadership skills in a variety of areas.

First, Ostrov said, managers need to sit back and take a deep breath.

"This can be very frustrating and there are a number of things, tools to draw from to help get re-centered when you meet with this resistance," Ostrov said. Ostrov said before approaching the employee who needs guidance, managers need to look in the mirror and reflect on what makes them tick -- and what "ticks them off." One of the keys to dealing with difficult situations is to make sure you have "emotional maturity and emotional intelligence," Ostrov said.

When dealing with an employee who is resisting necessary criticism, the manager can also ask others for advice.

"They may need to take a step back and get perspective," Ostrov said. "That might mean reaching out to others and ask how they've handled it. The thing not to do is to be reactive in the moment. You have to choose your words carefully, and human resources people really know this if they keep up with their employment law."

Ostrov said it's also important to make sure they handle critical exchanges in person. Never e-mail the employee, she said.

"Don't avoid the conflict or don't start this lengthy e-mail exchange. That's what some people are resorting to now and you just dig a deeper hole for yourself," Ostrov said. "It takes a lot of practice and high-level communication skills to deal with a defensive person."

When managers begin to feel "pushed back into a corner" by the employees -- for instance, if an employee begins using phrases like "I wasn't told I had to do that," or "You didn't give me enough time," -- it's time to get a stronghold on the conversation.

"This brings us in to listening skills," Ostrov said. "Always when you're hitting a brick wall and they're throwing boulders, slow yourself down and say, 'Let me understand' or 'Help me to understand.' "

"We all operate with assumptions," she said. "What you can do is say, 'We're getting off track and I am sensing that this isn't going over well with you.' That is showing in that statement that you zeroed in on the emotional tone of the employee and you're bringing it up and putting it on the table."

Often, Ostrov said, gentle, open-ended questions will help the employee start communicating better.

"Many times the employee will say, 'To be honest' and then go on and explain the situation," she said. "They may explain they're under a lot of stress at home or elsewhere. Managers can have a good opportunity to get on the same side of the employee and move toward collaboration."

Does Ostrov's approach work? Yes, she said. Ostrov said that as long as the employee is not derailing himself or herself with inappropriate behavior, then often the work situation or relationships involved can be salvaged.

"It does work, but it takes time," Ostrov said. "It's not a quick fix."

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