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[Mission](#)
[Services](#)
[Testimonials](#)
[Clients](#)
[About](#)

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Saving Careers

Dealing with a valued, long term employee who has become a “problem” is one of the most difficult personnel issues to resolve. Problem behavior may include resistance to change, undermining management authority, creating discord among other employees, and dictatorial behavior toward subordinates. When the problem employee is a senior manager, resolving these issues becomes especially important. In any event, the problem behaviors eventually cause the employee’s boss to reach a decision point: If this doesn’t change, I’ll have to fire this person. It is at this point – the “change or else” stage – that the best opportunity for a solution, other than termination of employment, presents itself. Using a three-step Why-What-How approach helps understand the attitudes driving the undesirable behavior and provides a structure for developing a customized solution that can save a career.

Why: Motivating factors

Our attitudes drive our behaviors, so understanding a person’s attitudes is fundamental because unless you change attitudes, persistent behavioral change is unlikely. Problem behaviors are often caused by fears and other negative feelings. For example, the particular environment in which a child grew up might leave that person with a fear of being taken advantage of or manipulated. These “fear drives” can result in selfish, domineering behaviors, and such people often resist collaboration with others and are not team players. They often view the world through a lens of scarcity, rather than abundance, and are typically critical and fault-finding. They may also overstep their operational boundaries and take inappropriate interest in other areas of the business.

Identifying specific attitudes that need to change begins with thinking about the employee’s personal and job history, and – metaphorically – asking the right questions. Personality assessments can be very helpful in this regard.

What: Leverage points

Choosing leverage points to influence change by the problem employee is the next step. The idea here is to find the best reward, punishment, or combination thereof to cause the employee to change. Overcoming inertia is hard! Bigger and more persistent problem behavior requires a more significant consequence to initiate change.

For people with negative, fear-driven behaviors like those described previously, a “stick, then carrot” approach works best. A threat (like getting fired) whose negative consequences are greater than the employee’s fear drives is usually necessary to make the employee participate in a behavior modification program. Rewards should also be part of the plan, but are secondary to the penalties if change does not happen.

How: A coaching plan

Changing behavior requires individualized coaching, and a consultant is the best choice for coaching a problem employee. As an outsider, the consultant is viewed by the employee as more objective and less likely to have hidden agendas. Moreover, the coach can keep certain discussions private and can offer the employee an opportunity to discuss sensitive topics. In a safe environment, people are able to bring concerns or beliefs out into the light of day and, in many cases, resolve or at least learn to deal with what had been worrisome burdens.

However, a problem employee will either resist or just play along with coaching unless the boss first makes clear the consequences of failure. Therefore, the “how” begins with a candid conversation between the employee and his or her boss.

A typical coaching plan for a problem employee begins with a two-hour meeting between the employee and the coach. The two will discuss what led to this coaching encounter, goals, a review of the consequences of failure, and discussions to begin building trust between the employee and coach. Plans for future coaching sessions are also discussed at the first meeting. Follow up 1½-hour coaching sessions, the first in two weeks and the next three weeks after that, include topics relevant to the behaviors that need to change. The coach provides both practical skill training and encouragement and support, and should be available for telephone consultations between meetings.

Coaching sessions after the first three are usually shorter, lasting about one hour, and are designed to build on the momentum gained earlier. Usually, four or five sessions are sufficient to change the main behavior problems. In fact, lack of good progress by the third session is a sign of likely failure; if this is the case, the coach and employer should consider abandoning or changing the coaching plan.

Coaching is not a silver bullet that will solve all behavior problems, but it offers a good chance to save an employee’s job with a company. When this happens, the return on the company’s investment in time and money is outstanding.

Tom Wagner

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