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Dealing with the angry employee

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by 25 Jan 2012

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Every workplace has at least one of these – an employee that seems perpetually angry. These employees eat up time and management energy, distract from the work at hand and can erode morale over time as their message spreads to co-workers.

There are generally four categories of 'angry employee' – the genuinely aggrieved; the cultural misfit, the professional agitator; and the personally upset. Identifying what type is the first step towards being able to effectively deal with the issue.

Workplaces are complex systems with politics, people, structures, policies and processes that can generate a genuine conflict or complaint. Responding to the issue quickly and professionally will mean there is less chance of the issue manifesting and festering. This may be as simple as allowing the employee an opportunity to let off steam and provide feedback on the issue.

It may mean directing the employee to a more structured complaint and grievance process. Or it may mean intervening

in the conflict either informally through an internal meeting or through a more structured mediation process.

Taking the issue seriously and responding in an appropriate manner is the key to successful resolution.

Then there are those employees who are simply angry – not at a specific issue or policy or person – but at everything and everyone in the company. These employees can make life miserable for those around them as they continually whinge and complain. It doesn't seem to matter what the company does (or doesn't do) – these employees simply don't fit the culture, and over time become more and more destructive. It is here that a well-designed performance appraisal and development system comes into its own.

Being able to have a frank conversation with the employee on a regular basis on how they are finding not just the role they're performing, but also the broader company culture can be invaluable for getting to the bottom of the 'anger'. And being able to have a discussion around values and cultural fit in the context of the individual's performance can put some objectivity around whether there is a good ongoing fit between the employee and the organisation. Increasingly, companies are realising that good performance is not just about achieving objectives, but the manner in

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which the objectives are achieved.

The professional agitator often has a role that would have traditionally required him or her to be cynical, angry at new changes and uncooperative.

Roles such as shop stewards and health and safety representatives have, in the past, sometimes attracted a personality that is anti-establishment, anti-management and just plain angry. Times, they are a changing; and fortunately many companies are investing in good relationships with their employees more generally and taking the time to build cooperative and consultative relationships with elected representatives. Genuine, effective and appropriate consultation will build the bridges over time to change these sort of adversarial relationships.

Finally, there is the employee who has issues on the home front and where the workplace is simply a forum to act out aggression and frustration. An accessible Employee Assistance Program - that allows for both manager and self-referral - can provide professional and appropriate support and advice on the situation. Once again, a well-designed performance appraisal and feedback system provides a mechanism for these sorts of conversations.

All of the above situations require managers that are able to hold genuine and appropriate conversations – and to know when to use what approach. Well-drafted processes and systems should support and enable those managers.

Dealing appropriately with an angry employee is truly one situation where a stitch in time can and will save time.

About the author

Tammy Tansley is the principal of Tammy Tansley Consulting, a boutique HR Consultancy specialising in workplace relations, change and organisational design to enable positive workplace change and performance

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COMMENTS

by Craig White | 5/02/2012 2:39:08 PM

This is something I see within organisations I deal with, partially driven by culture (of the industry), partially driven by (major) structure change within these companies.

Great advice pertaining to handling the different types of angry employee.

by Tammy Tansley | 6/02/2012 12:44:20 PM

Craig, you're so right. Changes in organisational structures (particularly when not handled well) can create such unnecessary angst and anger .. The unfortunate thing is that this often spreads throughout the organisation - ultimately, as you say, affecting the culture. Thanks for the comment.

by Diana Fisher | 7/02/2012 4:57:33 PM

Excellent advice especially with regards to solution mechanisms that should be established within an organisation to address anger issues. Would love a similar article with advice to address general negativity with particular emphasis on apathy

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