



Monthly Strategies

HR Strategies, LLC

Volume 23, Issue 3

March 1, 2026

Disruptive Employee Behaviors

Employee morale, productivity and customer service levels are at their highest when employees work effectively as a team and practice basic tenets of civility and respect for each other. This, unfortunately, is not always the case when employees display inappropriate and disruptive behaviors.

Behavior that is not consistent with basic collegial and professional expectations can result in significant negative consequences to the organization and its people and can increase an organization's potential legal liability.

Establishing Behavioral Expectations Through Training

Preventive, ongoing training can lay the groundwork for employees to understand their behavioral expectations and for managers to be prepared to act when employees fall short of those expectations. Basic training in people management and conflict resolution is a good starting place. Providing your managers with support, including the tools they need to succeed, will help them feel more confident when confronted with difficult employees.

Facilitating meaningful teamwork activities can also build better understanding between co-workers. Some employers use workplace personality testing modules to help employees recognize they may have different work styles and different tendencies in how they interact with others. Often, this realization of how one's own style and tendencies are just as valid as someone else's opposite style and tendencies can go a long way to diffuse formerly frustrating interactions.

More companies are now including civility training for all employees, which can include business etiquette, cultural sensitivity and diversity awareness components. Training should not only define civility and list the

employer's expectations (as allowable under the NLRA), but it should also teach what civility looks like and describe or act out scenarios ripe for incivility, giving participants the chance to practice how to maintain composure instead of acting out.

Steps for Managing Behaviors

Take notice and listen - One of the main reasons employees engage in disruptive behaviors is because they don't feel they are being heard. When unacceptable behaviors appear, good managers will start to pay close attention to what is going on and not turn away from problems they'd rather ignore. Make note of specific behaviors to address, including when they were observed and who was present. Take time to collect information and understand the issue as fully as possible. Be sure to solicit the problematic employee's point of view; by doing so, managers often learn of something that is blocking the employee's progress and causing them stress, which can be addressed and resolved. Just being heard can also be a factor in de-escalating negative behaviors before they get out of control.

Provide honest feedback - The key to managing difficult or disruptive employees is to distinguish the person from their behaviors. Talk to the employee about the behaviors being unacceptable but take care not to make any personal attacks on who the employee is as a person. Saying things like, 'You're a troublemaker' or 'You've got anger issues' are personal judgments that will put the employee on the defensive and hinder any productive exchange. Instead, focus on the behaviors by saying, 'Your behaviors are effective here; they are not effective here.' Give specific examples of when the employee was displaying the unacceptable behaviors, so they don't have to guess. For example, 'You've raised your voice three times in meetings in the last two weeks in response to a co-worker's legitimate, respectful

question or 'I've heard you talk negatively about Jack and Jill to other employees' are specific to the behaviors that need to be addressed. Discuss appropriate behaviors with the employee and ensure that they understand what is expected in the future. Don't make the mistake of thinking that good employees would instinctively know what to do to correct their behaviors or even that they would know their behaviors are problematic in the first place.

Document and follow disciplinary policies - Employers tend to forget that job performance expectations include behavioral expectations. In doing so, managers may talk to employees about their disruptive behaviors, even several times, but never document the interactions. Then, if they reach a point where they want the employee fired, there's no record of what discussions took place and what clear expectations were set. It's understandable that managers hope the behaviors will go away, but when they don't, having the documentation in hand will support an employer's actions to discipline or terminate if the situation becomes untenable. Even if all other job goals are being met, a disruptive employee displaying toxic behaviors is engaging in an actionable offense.

Employees should be told the specific consequences of failure to improve their performance. If an employee will be discharged if no improvement is shown, the employee should be told precisely that. Mincing words or speaking in generalities to avoid difficult statements is unfair to the employee, who may be surprised that the consequences are harsher than expected. A fair notice would entail a conversation that is direct yet respectful. Ultimately, though, the employee has the responsibility to adjust their behavior to correct the problem.

Follow up with the employee - One of the most common mistakes managers make is to have the appropriate conversation with an employee, consider the matter closed and put away the file. The greatest factor in sustaining improvements in performance is follow-up. Improvements should be recognized, and employees should be held accountable for

failures in not correcting the behavior. Nothing will affect the morale of other employees faster than watching unacceptable performance go unaddressed or, worse, be addressed and then tolerated, which suggests that the manager is incapable of dealing with the situation. Working with an employee, though, and giving him or her a chance to improve can also be an effective morale booster.

The Impact of Disruptive Employees

The cost of workplace bullying and other disruptive employee behaviors should not be taken lightly, and it can be measured in many ways. An organization can, for example, analyze the impact of these negative behaviors based on:

- Turnover.
- Employee engagement.
- Commitment to the organization.
- Job satisfaction.
- Productivity levels.
- Work quality.
- Estimated number of lost work hours.

If you choose to do nothing about disruptive employees, you will see the above areas impacted.

Managers and leaders have an ethical and sometimes legal obligation to investigate complaints or other evidence of bad behavior and to prevent its reoccurrence by taking prompt, appropriate remedial action. If the employer ignores the problem, it runs the risk of condoning unprofessional behavior and becomes vulnerable to potential legal liability.

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