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Handling Difficult Behavior at Work

A Manager's Guide for Today's Workforce

You inherit it

Nobody hands you a team of people who all communicate well, take feedback, and treat each other with respect. You get the engineer everyone is a little afraid to question. You get the person who says "sounds good" in the meeting and then works to undo the decision afterward. You get the 4:47pm Friday message that reopens a settled argument. Managing is largely the work of dealing with this well.

Most managers deal with it badly, and understandably so. The behavior is uncomfortable to name, the conversation is easy to postpone, and there is always a more urgent fire. So it festers. The quiet cost is that your best people notice what you tolerate. When a strong contributor watches a difficult colleague face no consequences, they draw the obvious conclusion and start updating their resume. You do not lose people to the difficult employee. You lose them to your silence.

This guide is for founders managing a team for the first time, and for leaders who stepped into a culture they did not build. It will not turn you into a therapist or hand you a script for every personality. It gives you a way to think about the behavior and a way to have the conversation, so the problem stops running your week.

Stop diagnosing people. Start describing behavior.

The instinct is to sort people into types. He is a bully. She is a know-it-all. That colleague is toxic. The labels feel accurate, and they give you shorthand for a pattern you have seen before. They also quietly wreck your ability to fix anything.

The moment you decide someone is a difficult person, you stop watching what they do and start reacting to who you have decided they are. Every neutral email becomes evidence. Every silence becomes an attitude. You also hand the organization a real liability, because "he has a bad attitude" is not defensible and "he interrupted two colleagues in three consecutive meetings" is.

Behavior is the thing you can point to, write down, and ask someone to change. A person cannot be corrected. A specific action, in a specific context, with a specific effect, can be. So drop "she is impossible in meetings" and keep "she talked over Priya and Marcus on Tuesday, and Priya stopped contributing after that." One is a grievance. The other is a conversation you can have.

The behavior you will meet, and what to do about it

The chronic complainer drains a room without ever crossing a line you can name. Nothing is a fireable offense, and that is the trap. Do not try to fix their mood. Redirect the pattern: when a complaint arrives, ask what they would change and what they are willing to own. People who complain for sport tend to go quiet when handed responsibility. People with a legitimate

problem will tell you something worth hearing.

The credit-taker manages up beautifully and shares nothing downward. The fix is not a confrontation about ego. It is visibility. Ask for status in a shared channel, name contributors directly in your own updates, and make the actual distribution of work impossible to hide.

The intimidator is the pattern people most want you to ignore, especially when the intimidator produces. A star engineer who makes juniors afraid to ask questions is not a high performer. He is a bottleneck who is costing you every idea those juniors never raise. Address the behavior plainly and early, because tolerating it once tells the whole team what your standards really are.

Incivility has moved online, and it is harder to catch there. The clipped reply, the pointed emoji, the person left off the thread on purpose. Remote and hybrid work did not create these behaviors, but they gave them cover. Treat a pattern of dismissiveness in writing the way you would treat it in a room.

The resistant expert knows the system better than anyone and uses that knowledge to block change. Bring them in before the decision, not after. Give them a real problem to solve rather than a conclusion to accept. Expertise deployed against you is usually expertise that was never asked for the right way.

Unreliability is the pattern most managers absorb instead of address. You quietly re-check their work, pad their deadlines, and route the important task elsewhere. Name it directly, tie it to the effect on the team, and set a clear expectation with a date. If nothing changes, you are no longer dealing with a behavior. You are dealing with a fit problem, and that is a different conversation.

The conversation most managers avoid

When you finally decide to talk, structure carries you through the part where your nerve fails.

Come with facts, not adjectives. Before you open your mouth, write down what happened, when, and what it cost. "You reassigned Dana's task without telling her, and she found out in the standup" gives the person something to respond to. "You are not a team player" gives them something to defend against.

Say why you are there in the first sentence. People read a vague opening as a threat and spend the whole conversation bracing. Name the topic plainly and the temperature drops.

Connect the behavior to something they care about. Not everyone cares about team morale in the abstract. Most people care about their reputation, their next role, and whether the people around them respect their work. Aim there.

Then stop talking and listen for the thing you are missing. Resistance is sometimes information: an unclear priority, a workload no one can carry, or a real fear about where the job is heading as the tools change. You cannot fix what you refuse to hear, and you will lose good people by mistaking fear for defiance.

Close with a specific change, a date, and a plan to follow up, then put a short factual summary in writing. A conversation with no defined outcome is a conversation you will be having again next month.

When it is you

Every manager carries at least one of these patterns. Maybe you avoid conflict until it explodes, or take credit without meaning to, or go cold in writing when you are stressed. The people who report to you already know which one it is. The strongest thing you can do is name it first, out loud, and tell your team what you are working on. It costs you a little pride and buys you a great deal of trust.

When to bring in HR

Handle most of this yourself. Bring in HR when the behavior touches protected conduct, safety, or the law, when a pattern continues after a clear conversation, or when you are moving toward formal discipline. By then your notes matter. The manager who documented as they went has options. The manager who did not has a story no one can act on.

Build the people side of your business with a partner who has done the work. HR Consultants of Virginia helps founders and established teams handle the hard conversations, train managers, and build people practices that hold up under pressure.

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