Recognizing Toxic Employees

Do you know the signs? And just what should you do if you identify one in your company?
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You know the word "toxic" often refers to nasty, chemical products or by-products--those compounds you know to be poisonous, dangerous, contaminated and even lethal. But did you know the word could also apply to employees, perhaps even someone in your own business?

Just what is a toxic employee and how do you recognize one? Are they really harmful to your business? And if they are, what exactly can you do about them?

Identifying the Disease

Like a virus, toxic employees can subtly--or overtly--spread their counterproductive attitudes or actions that can negatively impact the workplace. Their harmful, contrarious and antagonistic attitudes and actions can easily spread to other employees who then begin to agree with and identify with the toxic individual.

The result? Vulnerable employees without a strong immune system or the ability to rationally understand what's happening can become victims of this virus; these victims often can't discern or differentiate antagonism from positive criticism, can't separate forming negative coalitions from simply agreeing with colleagues. Because neither employees nor organizations are immune from employees with toxic, negative attitudes and behaviors, as the boss, you have to be aware of the signs, symptoms and impact of employee toxicity.

So just what are the symptoms? They are many:

- A decrease in or lack of productivity
- A decrease in or poor morale
- An increased frequency in arguments between the employee and others
- A sense that the employee is increasingly frustrated because "things just aren't going right"
- A negative, antagonistic attitude
- An increase in negative comments and personal attacks
- An unwillingness to work overtime or stay late without reason
- An unwillingness to "go the extra mile" while encouraging others to refuse as well

Other symptoms include infighting, backbiting, passive/aggressive behavior (aggressive actions done in a passive or weak manner), arguments or criticisms for the sake of being different or antagonistic, and an unwillingness to help out others in a culture that values providing input and assistance to colleagues.

This is not to suggest that opposing views or differences of opinions, attitudes and behaviors must be squelched. But when these behaviors are negatively affecting other employees and productivity, you've got to jump in and address the problem.

Curing the Problem

So what exactly should you do?

The answer is, "It depends." If you're a laissez-faire, hands-off leader, then you could do nothing and just hope the situation will go away or burn itself out. And every once in awhile, it will. But understand that in the majority of cases, this action (which is really an inaction on your part) will not correct the situation. On the contrary, it will only serve to allow the problem to grow and continue to negatively impact and infect your business's other employees, productivity, growth, profitability and success.

On the other hand, if you're an action-oriented entrepreneur whose would prefer to isolate and end these negative attitudes and actions, then you have several "antiviral" techniques you can use.

First, you need to "identify the virus." In other words, you need gather your data to ensure that you have an accurate and complete picture of the situation. You don't want to take any action based simply on hearsay or assumptions.

So your first step is to talk to any managers or supervisors who work directly with the toxic employee. Look at error rates, attendance or tardiness records, late arrivals or early departures. Determine whether the employee's work, such as reports or projects, is being completed on time and with top quality. If projects are late, delayed or laden with errors, try to determine why or if a pattern exists. Investigate the complaints of negativity or antagonism. Do these occur with just one individual or with several or many individuals? In other words, is this an isolated personal issue between two people or one that's happening across the board?

Next, speak with your staffers who work most closely with the employee in regards to problem employee's attitude toward work, colleagues, the unit and the company in general. Determine who else may be infected with a negative attitude, behavior or performance record.

When you have sufficient information to validate the complaints or anecdotes you've heard about the toxic employee, invite that employee into your office or a neutral office to discuss the situation. The goal here is to have a positive interaction with the employee, not an argument or negative confrontation. What you're attempting to do is determine the accuracy of your information as compared to the toxic employee's version.

Begin by stating your concerns in a general manner: that you've heard there are some potential problems, that the atmosphere is not as positive or productive as possible, that some employees are dissatisfied or upset. In other words, don't jump all over the employee with your information. Doing so will simply create a negative atmosphere and immediately put the employee on the defensive. In such cases, the outcome of the interaction is usually negative, stalemated and nonproductive. Instead, allow the employee to share their views of the situation, their relationships with their colleagues, their behavior at meetings, and any other areas in question.

Then state the results of your information collection. Identify key areas of inconsistency between your information and the toxic employee's views. Attempt to reconcile the views or at least get an understanding as to why differences in perceptions of the situation exist (the old "he said/she said" argument). Attempt to demonstrate how you and others see the employee as negative or toxic, even if the employee's views differ from yours.

At this juncture, one of two things usually is evident: Either the employee's views are inconsistent with your information, or the information from both sides is compatible. In the first case, the employee might refuse to believe your information. Then the employee can either decide to change their behavior and attitude anyway just to be more aligned with the behavior and attitude you want. Or the employee can simply refuse to change. In the second scenario, you'll then have to decide whether to begin an official warning system procedure or the termination process.

Keep in mind that when meeting with your toxic employee, your goal is to change their behavior and attitude. If you've invested time and money in developing an employee, especially a long-term employee, jumping quickly into the termination process may not be the best solution or return on your investment.

However, if it appears the employee just will not or cannot make changes that will lower the levels of toxicity everyone else is encountering, then beginning the termination process may unfortunately be exactly what is required.

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