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## *The Nature of Difficult/Marginal Employees*

*Why Don't These People Listen  
to Reason and Improve?*

**I**n many schools across the country, there are a variety of challenges facing principals. You may have had training or coursework on working with the curriculum, understanding data and assessment information, and processing other information related to the structural components of a school, but you have probably received minimal support in dealing with the human elements of a school. These human elements can be complicated and complex to deal with effectively. An area of difficulty for principals and other school leaders involves working with employees who are not performing up to standards and need to make changes. In many instances, these people require much work and focus in order to improve. From our experiences working with these employees, it is important to understand the background of their behaviors and put together a comprehensive plan (including follow-up) for addressing their behaviors. In this chapter, you will begin your journey toward getting a handle on the issues presented by

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these employees by understanding the foundation or background of their behaviors. In this chapter you will learn about the following:

- identifying negative employees' frames of reference
- the characteristics of difficult employees
- how to respond to change
- the possible causes of negative behavior
- faculty responses and contribution to resistance

Understanding the cause or root of the problem is essential to addressing it. Let's see how a relatively new principal works to find out some of the potential causes of her administrative assistant's performance:

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It is her third year as the principal of Paul Middle School, and Heather is bothered by the attitude of her administrative assistant, Barb. When Barb talks with parents and answers the phone, she is very curt and short. Several parents have approached Heather about the problem, and even the Parent Teacher Organization president has mentioned it. Heather has decided to try to improve the situation. In doing some investigational work, she has found that this behavior has been going on for at least 5 years, the entire time Barb has been at the school. Heather decides to gather some more information about why Barb acts this way before confronting the issue.

Through her discussions with others and with Barb, Heather has found that Barb views parent interactions as interruptions of her normal routine. She said that she feels that some parents have nothing better to do than come into the school and bother her with trivial issues. Barb has told Heather and others that she feels she has a lot of work to do and that these parents are keeping her from completing this work. She gets frustrated and short with them. Now that Heather understands at least a portion of the problem, she is ready to move forward in putting together a plan to deal with the issues of Barb's performance.

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As you can see from this example, Heather takes some time to understand the root causes of Barb's performance before formulating a plan and beginning to address the problem. This is one crucial part of addressing the issues presented by employees.

### **FRAMES OF REFERENCE**

In dealing with a variety of employees and problems over the years, we have found that many of them involve a structured frame of reference by the employee in question. In this section, we will examine the basics of this principle and provide ideas for how to identify it and develop strategies and ideas to address the negative situation.

In his groundbreaking book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn (1996) examines the development of scientific discovery and thought. We have adapted his basic structure to identify the stages that people go through in developing their thoughts and patterns related to both their professional and personal behaviors.

### FRAMES OF REFERENCE

- A person experiences a series of events. Her mind takes in the information or data from these experiences.
- The person's mind begins to see common attributes from these experiences and the information drawn from them. Her mind starts to put together the information from these situations and draw conclusions about the experiences.
- These conclusions begin to form definite patterns. The patterns work together to become a way of thinking or frame of reference for the person. This frame of reference begins to govern the way she sees the world and becomes reality for her.
- Because of the frame of reference, a comfort zone is established for the person. Experiences and information that fit into this frame of reference reinforce her thought pattern. She becomes comfortable in her existing thought pattern because it establishes predictability for her. Incoming information is filtered through this frame of reference. Information that matches the frame is reinforced; information that is counter to it can be discounted.
- Over time, the living or work environment can change. The person becomes uncomfortable with the new environment because it doesn't fit her frame of reference. To remain comfortable and reinforce the old thought pattern, she may change or discount the information being provided in the new environment.
- Because the person is trying to fit the new information from the environment into an old frame of reference, she can become resistant to the new thought patterns, behaviors, or information coming to her.
- After exposure to the new information or ideas for a period of time, the person begins to see how it connects or is related to her original frame of reference. The new incoming information begins to assist her as she develops a new frame of reference. Over time, she is able to embrace the new ideas and integrate them into her operating procedures.

Source: Adapted from Eller, 2004.

The information about frames of reference is very important because it helps explain why some people are difficult to work with as employees. At times, their ways of thinking about a topic or idea can be shaped by their environments and experiences. Keeping this in mind helps us as supervisors to deal with them and some of their behaviors. When we understand how someone learned a behavior, it can be easier to figure out how to help him learn a new behavior. Understanding another person's perspective is an important part of our success in dealing with negative or difficult

employees. We introduce the concept of frames of reference here so you can consider how you will try to understand others and use this information to provide appropriate supervision.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF DIFFICULT EMPLOYEES**

Unfortunately, human behavior has a lot of variability and some unpredictability. We recognize that every situation is different from another, but we have found some commonalities in the difficult employees we have dealt with in the past. In this section, we will share several of those characteristics and some practical considerations for dealing with them.

### **Lack of Awareness of Negative Behavior**

At times, employees are really not aware of the impact that their behaviors have on others. They move through their jobs (and sometimes their lives) not really being able to see how what they do affects others. This is caused to some extent by the fact that they though life with blinders on or with tunnel vision.

#### *Possible Remedies*

As the supervisor, it is crucial for you to provide feedback or information to the employee in order to help her see her unproductive habits. You have to try to figure out the best way to deliver this information in her preferred processing style so that she will see and understand it. For example, if an employee is a structured, data-driven person, you will need to deliver the information in a factual, concrete manner. If the person is relationship oriented, you may need to deliver the information in a manner more closely related to relationships. We'll talk in more detail about specific strategies in later chapters.

### **Denial of Negative Behavior**

Denial of the behavior can be related to the fact that employees are unaware of the problem or do not want to deal with the issue. As the supervisor, you have to decide the motivation behind the denial. Normally, we give offending employees the benefit of the doubt initially. But we quickly move to believing that the denial has a manipulative purpose when employees continue to use the negative behavior after we have identified it. From our experiences, some employees will put more energy into denial than it would have taken them to eliminate the problem in the first place. This could stem from the fact that they have been able to wait out previous supervisors who confronted them about problems.

*Possible Remedies*

As the supervisor, you need to let the employee know that you mean business when it comes to addressing the negative behavior. You will need to be direct and to the point when talking to him about the situation and be ready to follow up to see if the behavior has improved or if you need to move to the next disciplinary level. Our advice is to make sure you are ready both procedurally and emotionally when you begin to confront an employee about his negative behavior. We will offer more information about specific strategies in later chapters.

**Blaming Others for Their Situation or Behavior**

This behavior is closely related to denial but has some subtle differences, so it needs to be handled as a separate category. Difficult employees normally have become very good at shifting the blame for their inadequacies to others. Sometimes, they actually believe what they are telling you, but in most cases they use this technique as a form of manipulation to get you off their back.

*Possible Remedies*

When confronting a marginal or difficult employee, listen for cues that let you know she is trying to set the blame elsewhere. As you hear this happening, use a variety of strategies to address the situation. At times, we have stopped an employee in mid sentence and let her know that we understand what she is attempting to do and that we won't be thrown off track by it. In other cases, we have let the employee finish the statement and then asked focused questions that let her know we won't be fooled by the manipulative technique and that help steer the conversation toward resolution of the problem. In other cases, we listen to the employee's story/excuses and then confront the situation. In any case, you need to let the employee know that shifting of blame will not excuse her behavior and that it needs to be addressed. We will provide specific examples and ideas about how to address this type of behavior in each chapter that deals with specific employee groups.

**Justifying Their Behavior Based on the Expectations of a Previous Supervisor**

As hard it may seem to believe, this is a common defense we have seen used by employees over the years. Normally, they make comments like "Bill told me . . ." or "The last two principals didn't have a problem with . . ." or "You are the first supervisor to . . ." These kinds of statements related to previous supervisors are meant to undermine your confidence and make you back down on your demands. In our work with principals

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over the years, this technique has been successfully used by many employees.

### *Possible Remedies*

When an employee uses this technique, you need to recognize the manipulation and take steps to avoid being sucked in. If you begin to doubt your leadership (which is normal, by the way), you allow the employee to take you down the path of letting him off the hook. When he starts to talk about the supervision techniques and priorities of a previous supervisor, you need to respond in a positive but assertive manner. Comments such as “Thank you for your thoughts about (name the topic), but things are different now” or “I am a different supervisor than (name the person) and have some different expectations” let the employee know that you understand his perspective but need to operate the school in the manner that you feel best meets the needs of students under the current conditions. You may want to contact the previous supervisor to let that person know what is happening and that when you make comments about your leadership priorities to the employee you are not trying to make negative comments about the previous supervisor’s priorities. Since the employee is trying to undermine your confidence, be sure to let him know, as you confront the issues related to his behavior, that this technique will not work on you.

## **THE RESPONSE TO CHANGE**

People in general can be resistant to change. Difficult employees may dedicate much more effort to resisting change than it would take to learn the new idea or procedure associated with a change. In this section, we’ll describe some of the behaviors we have witnessed over the years as we have worked with difficult or angry employees in relation to the change process.

### **Waiting You Out**

In many instances, difficult employees have been in their positions for a number of years. They may have survived other principals who have tried unsuccessfully to deal with their performance issues. These principals may have moved on to other jobs, but the employees have stayed behind. Because of this survival behavior, some of these employees have learned how to mask their deficiencies or resist your directives until you, too, move on to greener pastures.

To combat this phenomenon, you will need to clearly communicate to the employee that you are interested in working with her in the long run. You may need to communicate your seriousness in order to attack her

deficits. We have found it beneficial to clearly communicate that you understand the “waiting you out” behavior as well as your seriousness and level of focus related to the employee’s issues. As with any effort to deal with deficient performance, building a sound follow-up program to change it is crucial to your success as a principal.

### **Justifying Why the Existing Behavior Is Much Better Than the New Behavior**

Employees exhibiting deficient behaviors sometimes spend a lot of time and energy justifying their deficient behaviors. You have to identify this situation, know it’s happening, and help the employee work through the issue. The challenge you will face is to acknowledge the situation without causing the employee to dig in on the issue or to think that you agree with his assessment of the soundness of his antiquated thinking. Here is a process that we use to combat this type of situation:

- Listen to the employee’s description of why the old or existing behavior is better for him than the behavior required by the new procedure. Don’t confirm or refute his perception at this point in the conversation.
- Ask the employee to provide more specific information to outline or justify his beliefs. Ask him to also provide evidence for his beliefs.
- Outline your ideas for the new procedure. Draw connections between your ideas and the old procedures. Help the employee see the larger outcome rather than the short-term technique or procedure.
- Develop a schedule outlining how the employee will transition to the new procedure. Be sure to identify the follow-up and support that will be provided to assist him in making the transition.
- If the employee is not willing to adopt the new procedure, you need to decide the importance or soundness of the new procedure. If it is sound, you need to work through a more aggressive strategy to implement it. If the resistance is not warranted, you may need to move toward transfer or termination with this employee.

### **Encouraging Others to Resist Change**

At times, employees seek the comfort of others when resisting change. They may think that getting others on the bandwagon will help them feel supported and will effectively resist the change. As a leader, you will need to address this type of issue head-on. Here are some strategies we have found helpful:

- Meet with the individual and try to understand her perspective.
- Talk to the entire group that is participating in or supporting the resistance. Work with them to help them understand the new procedure.

Help them see how it will help further the long-term objectives of the school or organization.

- Talk with members of the resistance group individually or in small groups. Help them understand the new procedure. Help them see the connections between it and their existing practices.

### **Deliberately Making Mistakes With the New Procedure to Sabotage It**

This is a common response to change by people wanting to resist. You have to recognize what is happening and the motivation behind the actions, and develop a strategy to deal with the issue. In many cases, we have found it helpful to make sure that those charged with implementing the new procedure are given the appropriate amount of training and development in order to ensure success. Designing and implementing an effective follow-up plan is also essential to success. We have also found that sitting down and having a heart-to-heart conversation with a sabotaging employee may also improve the situation.

### **Recruiting Community Members to Pressure You to Abandon the New Procedure**

This common strategy to resist change can be very destructive to the operation of the school. Some employees use their community connections and relationships to drum up support for the status quo. This type of behavior is common in medium-sized and smaller communities because employees tend to be closely connected as a result of their longevity at the school and/or live in the community or neighborhood. We have found over the years that taking a direct approach to this type of situation has some merit. First, it's important to talk with the employee about his strategy and how it not only undermines the success of the school and his credibility, but also involves outsiders who have no business being involved in school operations. We normally try to listen to the employee's concern and direct him back to appropriate ways of voicing his opposition within the building or district. At times and with careful thought, we have even had to prevent an employee from involving community members outside of the school in a particular situation.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCE OF THE DIFFICULTY**

We outlined some of the potential causes of negative employee behavior because it is important for you to take the time to think about why this

behavior could be happening. Once you are able to identify the potential causes of the behavior, you may be better able to design a strategy to address the problem. Consider the template provided in Figure 1.1 to help you diagnose the possible causes of your difficult employee's performance or behavior issues.

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have addressed some of the reasons why people develop the behaviors that make them difficult to work with. It is important that you begin your efforts to confront difficult people by understanding the background experiences that may be contributing to the problem. We have found that approaching people using strategies based on this understanding helps to de-escalate potentially emotionally charged or negative situations. This behavior has worked to our advantage in many cases and we have been able to work through situations without having to do major interventions or terminate staff members.

In putting the foundational aspects outlined in this chapter to work, take a few minutes to reflect on the following:

- Why is it important to try to understand the potential cause(s) of the employee behavior problem before formulating a strategy to address it?
- How does understanding the Frame of Reference model help you gain insight into the problem an employee may be exhibiting?
- What does a difficult employee stand to gain by enlisting the support of others in a resistance effort? How can you as the leader approach this situation?

In the real world, there are people who do not respond to the simple strategies we have outlined in this chapter. For them, you will need to move forward in an aggressive manner. The rest of the chapters in this book will provide you with strategies and ideas to help you be successful in changing their behavior or terminating their employment.

What skills do supervisors need in order to deal with these especially difficult employees? How do supervisors know whether they have the skills needed to work with such employees? How do supervisors who feel they are missing key skills, or want to improve the skills they have, set goals and gradually improve their abilities in this area? In Chapter 2, we will describe some ways to assess your present skill set and develop a sound learning plan to attain the skills you need in order to be successful in working with difficult employees.

**Figure 1.1** Difficulty Foundation or Source Diagnostic Template

Use this template as you work to understand the potential source of the difficulty you are experiencing from your employee. Once you have identified the potential source or sources of the difficulty, you will be better equipped to develop and design an intervention plan to diminish the difficulty or move to terminate service.

1. What do you think have been the past experiences of this employee that may have shaped his or her behaviors and attitudes?  
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2. How do you think this employee has been supervised in the past? What influence might this have in relation to his or her attitude or performance?  
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3. What pressures outside of the workplace do you think this employee experiences? How might these pressures impact his or her attitude and energy?  
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4. What age/experience factors do you think influence this employee, and how do those issues play into the situation?  
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5. What do you think are the employee's preferred tasks and operating styles? Does he or she seem to like to work in isolation or get energy from interacting with others?  
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6. What have you noticed that seems to motivate this person to do his or her best in the workplace? What do you notice that tends to lower this person's energy or motivation while on the job?  
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