

Adopt Problem People

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Managing people is an art that can be very complicated and frustrating. Most managers soon realize that they are spending an inordinate amount of time with a few problem employees. The Pareto principle applies in this instance: usually 20% of the people will require 80% of your attention.

When you have problem people on the team it is a great distraction because it prevents you from spending time on the strategy or on reinforcing people who are doing good work. I found a technique that helped me convert some of the more difficult workers into superstars.

The idea is to select one or two of the most difficult cases and "adopt" them. Don't tell them you are doing this; just start operating in a different way. The first thing to do is decide which of the problem people are worth saving. You will not be successful at saving them all, but by using this technique somewhere around 50% of the difficult cases can be converted. That can be a huge benefit to your effectiveness.

Janice was a caustic employee in one of the departments reporting to me. She once told her manager that he was "lucky to be in business." Janice was an informal leader of the people on her shift because she was witty and quick. People listened to her, which was bad news for the manager because she was spreading negativity. I saw great potential in Janice if she could change her attitude. I genuinely liked her despite the rough exterior and acid tongue. She had strength but rough edges.

I started getting to know Janice a lot better. I found out her unique set of needs and opinions. After a while I started to understand what made her tick. I made it a point to drop into the break room almost daily before the start of the shift and sit with her group to just listen. At first it was awkward, but they tolerated me and soon they actually welcomed me to their table.

I started improving the relationship with Janice by asking her opinion. I encouraged her manager to listen openly to her ideas for the insight they might provide instead of rejecting anything that came out of her mouth. Soon Janice started to turn and soften the rhetoric because she felt more respected.

We were now in a position to go the next step where we asked Janice to head up a planning group for the layout of a new packaging line. Her natural leadership showed in this effort as she was able to quickly get the cooperation of a core group of operators and maintenance people. The job turned out to be a big success, and we brought in top management and let Janice tell the story of how the job got done early and under budget. Top managers were impressed and said so.

Having a success to build on, we took a further risk and appointed Janice to a supervisory position. We also sent her for some excellent leadership training. She was excited to see these moves because there was real upward momentum in her career: something she never dreamed would happen. She was making more money and having greater influence in the business. At the same time the negativity was melting away. Gone was the caustic sarcasm that was her trademark for years before. She was a strong advocate for the management side of the actions that were contemplated.

Janice ended up retiring as a very successful supervisor. If she had stayed on, I was considering making her a department manager, she was that strong and effective. The best part is that she felt better about herself and what she had accomplished in her career.

Recognize that you cannot save all individuals who are problem employees. You can however, change some of them to go from a drain or negative influence on the environment to a very positive, even stellar, performer for the organization. Imagine the power of taking people who are a drag on performance and making them into your superstars.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*, *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at** www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763

New Book in 2014 - ***Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*** For more information go to www.astd.org/transition

