

**T**n the perfect world, employees would arrive at work on time and perform exactly what is in their job description. Well, maybe they would do just above what is expected in their job description. And, on occasion, perform some activities that have little to do with their job description or expertise just because they want to be a good team player. And, if we are really going to project perfection, it wouldn't hurt if they also had a cheery disposition while they performed these tasks.

Productivity would hum along. Profits would be up. And everyone would be happier.

But the ugly truth is that hiring an employee means you hired a human and not a job description or a mind-reading team player machine. And humans come with a whole luggage rack chock full with experiences, ideas, beliefs and feelings – both productive and unproductive.

The task for any business owner to create a fully engaged workplace can seem daunting. So many challenges that business owners face – strengthening sales, increasing productivity, creating a competitive advantage – all relate to the people in the business.

These challenges become acute when there is gossip or inappropriate behavior on the part of key employees. They are valuable to the organization yet they have this tendency toward Randy Moss-like attitudes that can spread an air of dissatisfaction like a cancer through the organization. Also, correcting these more problematic behaviors can reveal the worst behaviors of the business owner. Fighting gossip with gossip is rarely an effective strategy.

So, we sat down with a few self-proclaimed “People People,” experts on human and work dynamics, to discuss strategies for moving problem employees into fully engaged and committed employees (before they wreak havoc on the organization).

**The Gossip**

*By the time you hear the rumor, it has already made the rounds of the office. Often this person is the center of attention and can even be gregarious and charming. Left unchecked, however, his tendency to spread information has the potential to cause a workplace riot.*

**Favorite phrase:** “Now, you didn't hear it from me, but...”

**RYAN:** When a person gossips it is often because they want to feel powerful and connected. They are trying to connect with oth-

ers in a way that is not touchy feely. Ignoring it or assuming that gossiping is a common problem is the worst thing to do. Gossip can be a major cause of discouragement and even a healthy person that overhears gossip can become fearful or mistrusting.

**MEYERS:** Usually the best way to stop a gossip is to say to them, “When you say things about others, here is the wreckage that you cause. What you are doing is destroying relationships because people feel like they cannot trust you.”

**BRUENING:** A gossip is a magnet for other people, so you can



**Mary Kausch** chief people officer, HR etc!!!



tell them, “You are a great asset to any team because you make it gel.” But, you can express concern that their gossiping is going to push others away. You can usually ask them to plan a party or do community outreach to get a social cause up and running. They are generally good with people who are social in nature. They have the ability to do your company a lot of good.

### **The Flirt**

*AKA – the walking lawsuit. The idea that some thoughts are best not shared is a concept that this employee does not understand. The flirt will share harassing thoughts and make gestures as though he lacks a filter. This employee may also post details of his or her exploits on Facebook with you listed the employer.*

**Favorite phrase:** Anything that ends with “baby” or various pet names

**MEYERS:** You can tell them the behavior you observed. “I am perfectly okay with you being friends with Bob, but I would like you to restrain your physical contact. Can you commit to me that you will no longer do that behavior?” If they do it again, then there are possible legal implications.

**BRUENING:** These people are now taking their flirting to social media. It doesn't hurt to ask for the social media information you need so someone can friend this person on Facebook or other social media. That way you can monitor it.

**RYAN:** A lot of times, this person is acting out of a goal for undo attention. They are compelled to act in ways that will get them attention. Look for ways for the person to get positive attention that is over the table.

**MEYERS (smiling):** But never in a closed door room.

**RYAN:** Right. Look for ways that they can make a contribution and get attention in a positive and appropriate way.

### **The Complainer**

*This person is a lesson in how impossible it is to make other humans happy. If you give out a bonus, he will complain about the taxes. Compliment his ideas on a new project, and he will*

*ask you why you didn't offer the same enthusiasm for his other ideas. This person lives in a constant state of negativity.*

**Favorite phrase:** “Whaaa.”

**MEYERS:** This is the easiest one to fix. When someone wants to complain, I just ask them, “And what is your solution?” I just keep asking until they stop complaining to me. What I won't do is tell them how right they are. Don't join in and agree, just say, “I can see you really care about that, what do you think the solution should be?”

**RYAN:** Make sure you have regular meetings where part of the agenda is the raising of complaints. So, if people complain to you, you can say, “That is a great thing to put on our agenda for this week's meeting.” So, it is not going to be ignored, but it is going to be handled as a group.

**BRUENING:** The tendency may be that you want to tune them out, but they may provide valuable information on your organization that is being overlooked. You don't want them to drag you down a road of negativity, but you have to listen because you may get some value out of it.

### **The Maverick**

*The ends justifies the means for this nonconformist. While you try to open to being challenged, this person constantly wants to do things that are in opposition with your values and procedures. Don't hold your breath for an apology.*

**Favorite phrase:** “I don't need your permission.”

**RYAN:** There is a good chance that he feels he needs to overpower. You don't want to enter into a struggle. Acknowledge what they want and state what you want. Then, ask them how you can work this out so everyone can get what they want. They are thinking they have to overpower. You can work with them to create a win-win.

**KAUSCH:** You have to channel the maverick's energy. Be clear on where we are going and what the expectations are. When they are doing it their own way, you can show them how it does not line up with the direction and expectations.

## **WAIT...THE BOSS COULD BE THE PROBLEM?**

How to stop being the poster child for problematic behaviors.

### **Be Proactive**

Fad diets usually lead to more weight gain and an unhealthy disposition. The same is true of your workplace culture. “Many managers have a short-term view of things when someone is acting out,” says Judy Ryan, human systems specialist, Expanding Human Potential. “Instead of focusing on just the problematic employee, business owners need to look at the group dynamics that need to be addressed.”

### **Get Help**

You may have always considered yourself a “people person,” but that was before people started calling you their boss. “Every organization needs a coach on board,” says Jim Parker, president, The Mentor Connection. “It costs them more when they don't have a coach. The most successful leaders make a commitment to the long range view. That has to include getting the advice and counsel of a professional.”

### **Create a Framework for Talking about Successful Behaviors**

Even though it may seem as insignificant as a semantics argument, using consistent language is important when motivating employees. “The first thing that we do is figure out what are the behaviors that generate success in the organization,” says Marvis Meyers, vice-president, training and organization development, AAIM Employer's Association. “Then you can do a gap analysis. We have a successful behavior called ‘integrity.’ So, if someone is gossiping, you can point out how that behavior is unsuccessful. It is not bad or wrong. It is unsuccessful in that it does not match our values.”

### **Don't Change People**

“Typically when you are dealing with a problem employee, you are not asking them to change a behavior,” says Mary Kausch, chief people officer, HR etc!!!. “You are asking them to make a different choice. They are intelligent people, so you don't need to change them. Just make it clear that certain behaviors are not going to be tolerated.”

They are probably innovative. They have lots of ideas. They want to go, go, go. So, you need to channel it into the goals your business has.

### **The Buck-passer**

*This one consistently blames others for his or her own failure to perform. Projects hit roadblocks when they hit this employee's desk because it is "above their paygrade." While delegation is a good quality, this person abuses others' work schedules.*

**Favorite phrase:** "That's not my area."

**MEYERS:** Usually, they don't understand what outcomes they are responsible for. They know their task list, but they don't understand outcomes. I usually tell them that it is the outcomes that they are responsible for, and not specific tasks. So that means the tasks that you need to complete to achieve the outcome are your area – that is your responsibility.

**RYAN:** Sometimes these people feel they are inadequate. Don't buy into their presentation of themselves as inadequate. It is tempting to try to rescue this person, lower your standards or fire them. Find ways to hand them more responsibilities and ask for their ideas while reminding them of their capabilities.

### **The Slacker**

*A consummate underachiever. This employee always seems to have another excuse as to why a deadline was not met or his part of a presentation is missing. He or she can appear busy yet have nothing to show for their time.*

**Favorite phrase:** Open-mouth breathing.

**KAUSCH:** They need to see that their activity is not getting the outcomes or results that are needed.

**MEYERS:** I like to ask them what skills they have that they aren't using and what they think blocks them from using them. A lot of times they are just in the wrong job. I have seen managers who load up their A-players or star employees with work to pick up the slack, and that is a great way to turn a great employee into a slacker.

**BRUENING:** The best way to deal with this person is to introduce him to your competitor. You are not going to change the slacker's behavior. They will always be your lowest player. There will always be an excuse as to why they are not getting the job done. This person may not value what your company values, so get them out.

### **The Ticking Bomb**

*Life with this employee is just the brief moments between explosions. People walk on eggshells and live in fear of this abrasive and bullying person. He or she has the ability to scare off otherwise talented and engaged people.*

**Favorite phrase:** \$@#\*!!

**RYAN:** This person is trying to do things that are shocking. Most people get hurt or retaliate with push-back behavior. A way that you can help them is acknowledge that they are angry or hurt. Give them as much opportunity to expel it. Ask them if there is more. It is like you are purging it from them. Periodically, you need to set up ways that people can express their pain so they are not a ticking bomb.

**MEYERS:** We are working with a CEO that is terrified of his CFO. The CFO uses his anger to demonstrate power. He will go on the production floor and scream at them. With the ticking bomb, it is a matter of telling them, "You need to get this anger under control." If they are truly ticking bombs, they like having people tip-toe around them. It is a power move. They want others scared of them and if that is the case then that person needs to be validated, but they need to be told directly that the behavior is not acceptable and that others will leave if it continues.

### **The Know-it-All**

*He knows everything...just ask him. Or don't, and he'll offer his opinion anyway. He always has to be the smartest person in the room. Condescending, critical, finds a problem with everyone's ideas. You can practically hear 'you idiot' at the end of every sentence.*

**Favorite phrase:** "<Sigh> Let me make this simple for you."

**MEYERS (laughter):** I have been labeled as a know-it-all.

**PARKER:** With anybody in our business, it is easy to get labeled as a know-it-all. We have to be on top of things and have solutions all the time. We have to be on.

**RYAN:** These are usually high asset people who can't be let go. They want to be seen as more knowledgeable and important than other people. They sometimes say things that make others feel inadequate because they don't feel good enough. One of the worse things to do is to get disgusted or compete with them. That is what they are trying to get people to compete. Directly acknowledge their assets and gifts and turn them to using them in the service of others instead of competing with others.

**BRUENING:** This is not a person that should be facilitating a team. They don't see the boundaries of a team project or when to let others appear knowledgeable. You are not going to mold them or change them into a better team player. If they are truly intelligent, then put them in a closet and let them produce. ■