



## HOW TO RECOGNIZE A DIFFICULT EMPLOYEE

As a manager, it is sometimes hard to distinguish a "difficult employee" from a "troubled employee" or "poor hire." Working day to day, it is easy to slip into denial about employee problems and put blinders on to behavior not consistent with workplace exceptions. It can be challenging to know the difference between what looks like "bad behavior" and what might be an indicator of a more serious problem affecting the employee's performance. Knowing the difference can help the manager stay focused on getting their own job expectations, while being supportive and offering real help to employees.

Managers and supervisors sometimes become part of the problem by failing to recognize a problem and take action. Unchecked, a difficult employee can begin to dominate the group and cause you to lose credibility. It is the manager's responsibility to observe potential problems and address them directly with the employee in question. Building relationships with employees helps to make this process easier.

When a manager fails to get involved in a problem situation, there is the potential for more issues to arise as a result. It is good to remember that the employee in question, the manager, and even the work group itself can be negatively affected when appropriate action is not taken. The first step a manager can take is to stay mindful of each person in the work group. The supervisor or manager can start by asking whether the employee is difficult, troubled, or simply a poor hire.

**Troubled Employees** have proven track records but have declining job performance as a result of a personal issue. Their performance decline could stem from almost any personal issue such as depression, addiction, family issues, legal problems or chronic work overload. These employees are historically trustworthy and good workers, but for some external reason they are not working up to job expectation. Most employees with personal issues will improve with constructive feedback, referrals to the EAP, and supportive follow-up.

**Difficult Employees** often fluctuate between poor and great performance. They may perform duties, tasks and roles that fluctuate and do not meet expectations. They can be your best and worst employee wrapped into one. They can lie, be lazy, or act indifferent. They can also be troublemakers, always "stirring the pot," mobilizing the troops against you, or constantly challenging you. They may also have annoying habits such as chronic griping, inflexibility, defensiveness, or "high maintenance." They may be an excellent performer on good days but inconsistent on others.

Setting consistent limits with a difficult employee may help to curve the behavior. If not, standard discipline such as verbal warning, written warnings, and a performance improvement plan may be the only way to go. If termination is necessary, a failed PIP will give you the documentation you need to go forward with an employment action.

**Poor Hires** are those employees who never perform up to the job expectations. They often end up in the organization because of a poor interview, inadequate reference check, or because you "saw what you wanted to see." This group will rarely meet expectations despite performance coaching, counseling, or discipline. Don't spend months or years trying to develop a poor hire. Instead, confront the problem and do what you can to help the individual find a more appropriate job. As with any employee problems, alerting Human Resources of your situation early is always recommended.

Although the mission of the EAP is to help troubled employees get back on track, we can also help with difficult employees and poor hires. It is very possible that the troubled employee, with some support and resources, can get back to being a top performer. Recognizing that their job may be in jeopardy,



the difficult employee may become open to counseling during the disciplinary process while the poor hire may require career assessment services and emotional support during his or her job search.

The EAP is here to offer support and consultation to managers around these difficult situations. Remember that the EAP is a great management tool with almost any type of employee issue or situation. Visit the EAP at [www.kgreer.com](http://www.kgreer.com) and the Manager's Toolkit or call 1-800-648-9557.