



Employees from Hell—How to Turn them Around or Turn them Out

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Employees from Hell— How to Turn them Around or Turn them Out

- Speaker: **Larry Johnson, CSP**
- Moderator: **Mel Kleiman, CSP**

The Big Idea

People are driven by needs, and “employees from hell” are often acting in response to their unmet needs. Usually their behavior is tolerated, thus rewarded—reinforcing it and perpetuating the problem. Managers need to intervene by withdrawing the reward, and confronting the person about the behavior, guided by a six-step process.

Quick Summary

- Before dealing with an employee from hell, managers need to define an employee from hell.
- Next, analyze how the problem behavior is being reinforced and recognize that an action plan will mean withdrawing reinforcement consistently, not intermittently.
- Understand that most problem behavior is motivated by an unmet need and try to discover what this unmet need is.
- The formula for fixing the problem behavior: Withdraw the reward, fulfill the unmet need, and confront the employee.
- A six-step process will alleviate the problem, one way or the other.

Context

Drawing on theories of behaviorism, Larry Johnson shared his insights about why some employees are “employees from hell” and how managers can extinguish their problem behavior.

Key Themes

Before dealing with an employee from hell, managers need to define one.

Before taking action to correct the behavior of a problem employee, it’s important to be sure that’s what the person really is. One definition (in the words of Dr. Patrick Handley): “Those frustrating people who chronically stand in the way of your doing your job or living your life effectively.”

Everyone has personal biases and knows people who rub them the wrong way for no good reason. To ascertain that personal biases aren’t coloring your perception of a person, ask yourself if he/she displays the “three Cs” of a difficult employee:

- *Causing a problem.* Is the person really impairing the organization’s effectiveness, for example, by hurting morale or productivity?
- *Consistently difficult.* Does the person display the objectionable behavior consistently?

– *Consensus.* Do others seem to agree the person’s behavior is a problem? (Don’t assess this via any formal measure that will be talked about; simply keep your ears open.)

You can’t change people, but you can change bad behavior —by withdrawing reinforcement for this behavior.

Limit your expectations to changing the objectionable behavior, as you can’t change people’s personalities or even their bad habits. The behaviorism branch of psychology tells us that:

– *Reinforced behavior is more likely to be repeated.* If an obnoxious co-worker interrupts others in meetings and no one stops him, the behavior continues.

– *Intermittent reinforcement can be more powerful than constant reinforcement.* Think of a dog at a dinner table, rewarded with scraps rarely but every night sitting in wait.

– *Unreinforced behavior will increase before extinguishing.* A mother who stops granting a toddler’s request for candy at a grocery store will see escalating degrees of tantrums. Fourth gear might even be self-induced choking that attracts sidelong glances. On the next shopping trip when she says “no,” the child will skip the earlier gears and go right into fourth.

In workplaces, bad behavior is often reinforced by being tolerated. The lessons of behaviorism imply that: 1) the action plan must entail no longer tolerating the behavior; 2) this reinforcement must be withdrawn consistently, not intermittently; and 3) expect things to get worse before they get better, but stay the course.

“You may have to ride herd.”

– Larry Johnson

Understand that most problem behavior is motivated by an unmet need.

Behaviorism can inform the process, but recognize its limitations. Its theories may hold fast with rats in a maze, but people are complex. Rats don’t go out of their way to seek vengeance, for example. People are driven by emotional needs, and bad behavior is often a symptom of unmet needs.

For a relationship to be healthy, the give and take of need fulfillment between people must balance. The “Law of Mutual Reciprocity” says that “To the degree you give others what they need, they will give you what you need.” The concept is fundamental—schools teach children to treat others right in order to be treated right in return, as do religions (e.g., the “Do unto others” rule in Christianity and the concept of karma in Eastern religions, commonly distilled to “What goes around comes around”).

So it behooves the manager of a problem employee to understand the need underlying the bad behavior and to try to meet it. This doesn't mean giving employees what they want. Mutual reciprocity works at the *need* level, not the *want* level. It's important to understand the difference: Getting a need met contributes to psychological well being, whereas getting a want met brings just momentary happiness. For example, one may *want* to be heard by a friend but *needs* to be respected by that friend. As head of a company, Mr. Johnson *wants* to have final approval on all decisions; what he *needs* is to know what's going on and to trust those who work for him.

The formula: Withdraw the reward, fulfill the unmet need, and confront the employee.

Extinguishing problem behavior entails taking away the rewards for such behavior, fulfill the individual's deeper unmet need, and addressing the behavior by confronting the employee. A six-step process for confrontation and follow-up will alleviate the problem, one way or the other:


- *Describe the problem specifically and explain your concern.* Before starting, know what you want as a result. This will help you avoid confronting people to punish them or just to make a point. Explain the problem clearly and directly, describing past events only as a basis for problem solving, not dwelling on them. Since the past can't be changed, harping on it tends to make people defensive and causes them to perceive the confrontation as a personal attack. Moreover, speak in positive, not negative, terms: don't tell the employee what to stop doing without describing what to do instead. (Instead of "Stop monopolizing meetings," say "You need to give others a chance to talk.") Explain why the behavior creates a problem. ("Your monopolizing diminishes the contributions from others and limits our ability to arrive at the best solution.")
- *Ask for his or her view.* Asked "Do you see the situation this way?" the meeting monopolizer might reply, "You hired me for my expertise, and no one else speaks up."
- *Summarize content and feelings.* Recap what you heard, so the employee recognizes that his point of view is valued and understood.
- *Ask for input and agree on a solution.* Using the example above, the manager might suggest that at the next meeting they ask others' input first while the monopolizer holds off until after others have been heard.
- *Clarify your expectation and describe consequences.* Explain that in the future, you expect the agreed-upon plan to be followed or there will be consequences. Be clear on what these consequences will be and make sure you have the authority to execute them. (If consequences include transfer or firing, make sure with the HR department that there are adequate grounds.)
- *Document and follow-up.* It's important to document whether and how the behavior changes post-agreement, supplying plenty of detail. Then if the behavior doesn't change, you


have demonstrable justification for setting the described consequences in motion. And you must. The agreement that emerges from the confrontation should be treated as seriously as a contract, even if not put into writing. A contract is worth only the willingness of both sides to enforce it.


"It's often not easy, but doing the right thing for the right reason is always the right thing to do."

– Larry Johnson

Other Important Points

 **The boss from hell?** If you have a problem boss, the same formula and steps apply—if the boss will listen. If not, choose from three healthy options for dealing with any life situation: 1) proactivity (keep trying to talk to the boss); 2) acceptance ("Some things in life just have to be accepted, as married people know," quipped Mr. Johnson); 3) or leaving. Avoid unhealthy options like escaping through drugs or alcohol.

 **Once a jerk, always a jerk.** Often problem employees are simply "jerks"—with the objectionable behavior embedded in their personalities or representing bad habits that won't change. You can't "de-jerk" them.

 **Leaders are celebrities.** Like celebrities—role models by virtue of their fame—an organization's leaders are watched closely. They are discussed at dinner tables, known of by children, judged by subordinates—and are expected to protect their direct reports. The respect they garner, and thus their effectiveness, can be eroded if they fail to deal with a problem employee swiftly.

Case Study

Mr. Johnson once had to work on a project with a coworker from hell, a "conversational rambler." He feared that little would get accomplished as she droned on and on. So he took her to lunch, allotting an hour before a meeting he had to attend (an escape plan). He resigned himself to listening to her over lunch and hopefully accomplishing something productive during that time.

That listening was just what she needed. She was so grateful that she sent him a thank-you note to express her appreciation for his listening to her, which she wrote, "not many people are willing to do." He was surprised by the self-awareness this implied, and more surprised by how dramatically her rambling diminished, with him at least, after that. They became a productive team, and even forged a friendship. They spoke frankly about the problem, and she accepted gratefully his offer to signal her in meetings when she was rambling. He had alleviated the problem by meeting her previously unmet need to be heard.

Biography

Biographies

Larry Johnson, CSP

Larry Johnson is a well-known expert in the fields of management, leadership, and building positive organizational cultures. He is the co-author of the *Absolute Honesty: Building A Corporate Culture That Values Straight Talk And Rewards Integrity*. Mr. Johnson has presented at several Society for Human Resource Management chapter conferences as well as at three American Society of Association Executives annual conferences. His clients include Harley-Davidson, American Express, McDonald's, Nordstrom Department Stores, Federal Express, Aetna, Lloyds of London, the American Healthcare Association, and the Federal Reserve.

Mel Kleiman, CSP

Through his frequent contributions to trade publications and industry websites such as *Convenience Store Decisions*, *Auto, Inc.*, *HR.com*, *the Society for Human Resource Management*, and *Progressive Business*, Mel is recognized as today's most influential expert on how to hire and retain the best hourly employees. Mel captivates convention and corporate training audiences throughout the world with specific ways to attract, select and retain the employees who comprise 70% of the U.S. workforce. Mel's clients include many well-known names like Exxon/Mobil, Time Warner, the National Restaurant Association, Pizza Hut, Coca-Cola, the International Association of Chain Drug Stores, the National Association of Convenience Stores, Comfort Keepers, Dairy Queen, Jiffy Lube, and the Multi-Unit Franchising Conference & Expo.

After successfully owning and operating three businesses and being the largest holder of Hertz franchises in the country, Mel founded Humetrics, LP, in 1976 when he realized that while there were an abundance of books, tests, tools, and systems on the market to help business owners and hiring managers recruit and select professional staff, there was a dearth of resources for those who hire hourly workers.

Mel's subsequent success is a result of his passion for helping employers minimize costly employee turnover, his extensive research work, and his development of simple, but effective tools and systems that solve common problems. His speaking, training, and consulting work with hundreds of clients over the years keeps him on the cutting-edge of today's best practices and procedures for hourly employee recruiting, selection, and retention.

In 1999, the National Speakers Association awarded Mel their *Certified Speaking Professional* designation, an honor earned by fewer than ten percent of professional speakers worldwide. He has also been a member of the Society for Human Resource Management since 1999.

Mel has authored five books including the bestselling *Hire Tough, Manage Easy*; *267 Hire Tough Interview Questions*; *Recruit Smarter, Not Harder*; *180 Ways to Build a Magnetic Culture*; and *So, You Got the Job – Now What?*