

Why Your Employees Drive You Nuts

I was discussing health care with a client not long ago, when he started sharing his company's experiences with employee health care purchasing. Before long he was expounding on his employees' emergency room habits with white-knuckled clenched fists.

Everybody in management has similar stories, and many have similar reactions. Chronic late lunches, last-minute call-offs around deadlines, and other habitual rule-breaking and -bending gives a lot of managers fits. In my HR career I've had to help managers deal with bazillions of such issues, and I've become convinced there is one reason above all others for why they occur.

It's rarely because they're bad employees, or bad people. Why do people do the things that drive you nuts? Most often, it's because they can.

I've observed that people constantly test the boundaries. If you say work starts at 8, they want to know if 8:05 will be ok, or 8:10, or maybe 9. Does work start at 8, or does it not? Is the Tuesday deadline really COB Tuesday, or is it Tuesday night, or maybe Wednesday? So, you need to be clear about whether a rule is really the rule, and if not, then make it the real rule.

In many organizations, untrained managers don't address problems because they don't know how, or they're afraid of inadvertently handing their employer a lawsuit, or they just assume their employer accepts a certain behavior (like Tuesday deadlines really being Wednesday). These managers often feel they're at the mercy of their employees, instead of confidently applying some of the tremendous power they actually have over their employees (especially in the US). Coming into an employee issue as an outsider, it's often remarkable to me how managers simply accustom themselves to these problems instead of addressing them.

Lastly – and most interesting as an armchair psychologist – is the aggravation leaders experience simply because employees do what the organization's rules allow them to do. Leaders will fume over employees' use of sick time (or the emergency room), without wondering whether they therefore should be offering such benefits at all.

Any of this sounds familiar to you? If so, here are a few things you can do to restore your sanity:

- **Make the rules the rules.** If the Tuesday deadline really has to be COB Tuesday, then make it COB Tuesday and stop tolerating Wednesday. If it can really be Wednesday, then make it Wednesday. If you're going to fret about all the exceptions, then either you'll have a rule or you won't. Pick one of those two options and manage to it.
- **Evaluate job candidates on what matters to you.** If you're trying to control your unscheduled absenteeism, drill your candidates on their history of unscheduled absenteeism. Explain your organization's views on that topic and explore how candidates will meet your expectations. If you're not happy with their answers, don't hire them.

- **Reinforce the good behavior you want from people.** When people do the right things, catch them in the act with praise or thanks. Let people know that doing it right matters.
- **Train managers to know their ground.** If it matters to you, they should understand the context of an issue from the legal, ethical, and company standpoints, and have the training and support to confront problems with confidence and professionalism.
- **Don't let it drive you nuts.** Once you've done what you can, you have to keep the problems that still exist in perspective. If you're going to offer a health plan, people will use the emergency room, and that's more expensive than a doctor's office visit. Remember that you really didn't hire a raft of fundamentally dishonest people.

People do the things that drive you nuts because they can. They'll stop doing those things when they can't do them anymore. Whether and when your organization gets there is far less a matter of the people you hire as it is the organization you lead.