

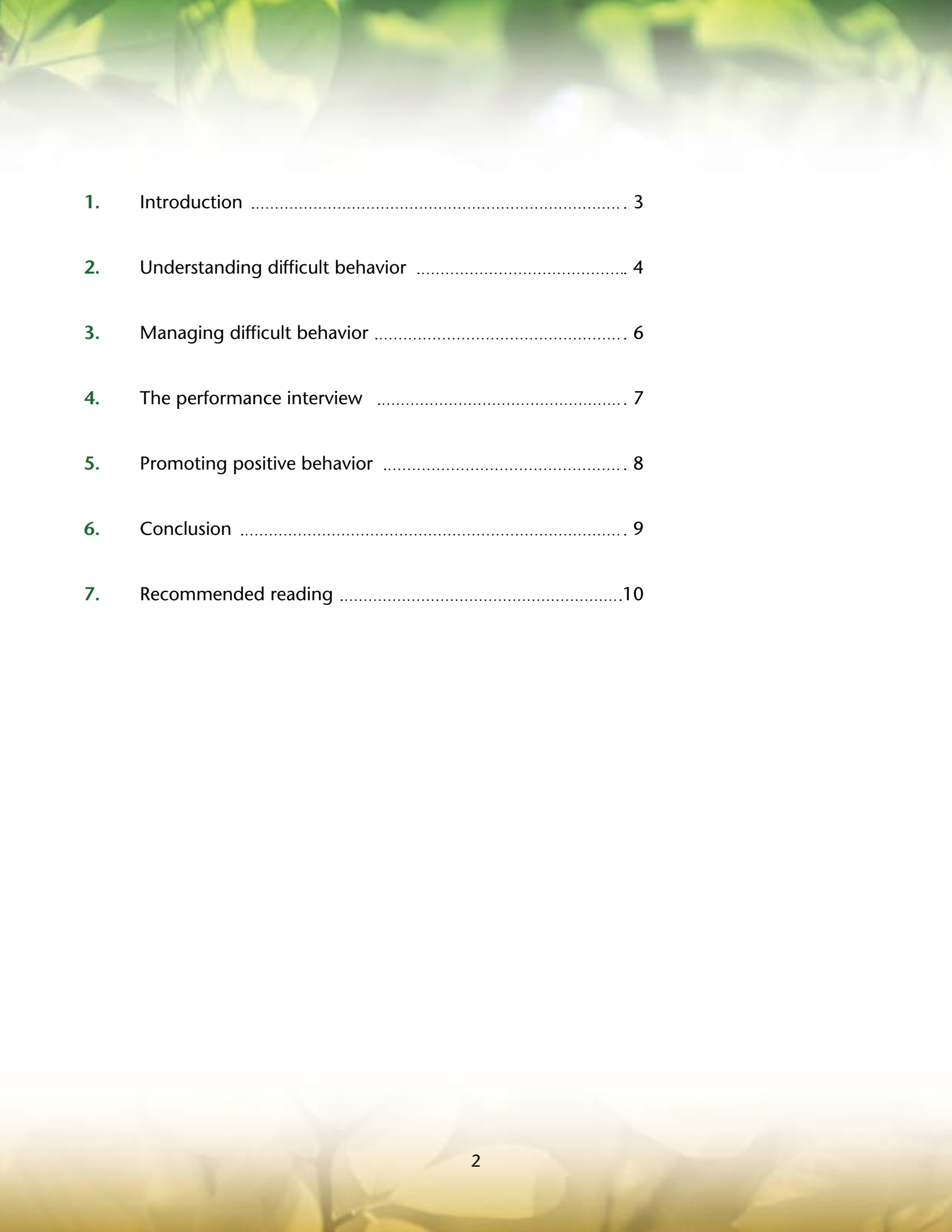
GROUP LIFE
& HEALTH

ONLINE EDUCATIONAL BOOKLET
MANAGING DIFFICULT BEHAVIOR

Well.
And well worth it.



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Introduction

In a perfect world, workplaces would be filled with highly motivated, enthusiastic and pleasant people. No one would ever complain, play politics, argue or make unreasonable demands. Conflicts would be nonexistent. It would be nice wouldn't it?

On the other hand, it's the difference in personalities, skills, responsibilities and approaches to work that create a stimulating, creative and highly productive organization. Disagreements and disputes are inevitable. But now and again, we encounter a truly difficult person, someone whose attitude or approach to work is so skewed, they're causing problems for their fellow employees. As a manager, you must deal with this situation as soon as possible.

These are not individuals whose behaviour is so outlandish as to merit dismissal; many may be highly effective employees or truly great people. It's just that their behaviour is a drain in terms of wasted time, energy, reduced productivity, increased employee turnover or absenteeism, as well as greater levels of stress and frustration from co-workers.

Difficult people are not a new phenomenon. We see them everyday having temper tantrums on the highway, condescending to others at PTA meetings, being rude in the supermarket or bullying a waiter. At work, however, difficult people can cause havoc to morale, personal relationships, effectiveness and even customer satisfaction. A good manager does not ignore this situation, hoping the person will "smarten up". Dealing with the problem is not a pleasant task, but it's essential, because disruptive behaviour is contagious and spreads quickly through an organization.

More information and assistance is available through Expert-Aide, a service that offers professional coaching and consultation for managers to help them deal with employees who are facing difficulties. Orientation sessions and online booklets are also available, as are referral services for employees who are facing difficulties that effect, or could effect, their job performance. Contact Expert-Aide at 1 866 314-9533 (English service) or 1 866 314-9534 (service en français).

Understanding difficult behavior

It's difficult for managers to build and motivate an effective and cohesive team when one or more members of that team are difficult to work with. Anger, rudeness, irritability, surliness, resistance, lack of punctuality and a "bad" attitude are behaviours that don't just frustrate managers, they have a negative impact on the entire work team. Morale, teamwork and interpersonal relationships suffer as does productivity and efficiency.

Why are some people so difficult? Negative behaviour is often either a coping mechanism or a reaction to other issues, such as a workplace or personal problem.

EXAMPLES OF DIFFICULT BEHAVIOR

- Moody
- Hostile
- Condescending
- Resistant
- Surly
- Gossiping
- Complaining
- Verbally abusive
- Uncooperative
- Blaming
- Ignores management direction
- Edgy
- Argumentative
- Sarcastic
- Irritable
- Rude
- Tactless
- Negative
- Angry
- Whiny

The first step in managing difficult people is to understand that it is not the people who are difficult, it is their behaviour.

Coping skills

Every one of us experiences stress, whether it's a long commute in the morning, a last minute project at work, juggling work and personal responsibilities, financial problems or conflicting work demands. It's normal to feel anxious, angry, frustrated or resistant to these daily stresses and each one of us has a different way of reacting to those stresses.

The morning commute is a perfect example. Some drivers accept the rush hour traffic as something they cannot change and concentrate on driving safely. They may arrive at work a little peeved, but soon shake off their annoyance and turn their attention to their professional responsibilities.

Then there are the individuals who can't accept not being in control of the morning commute. These are the people who shout, swear, make obscene gestures, cut people off and generally work themselves into a lather. By the time they reach the office, they're furious and remain so for the rest of the day as each additional stress further fuels their rage.

Different people, different coping skills.

Managers who recognize the role coping skills play in behavioural problems can better coach their team members and refer employees to seek help from their EAP on stress management, anger management or even nutritional and lifestyle advice.

Workplace Problems

A negative attitude and difficult behaviour could be from a work-related issue. Too much work, too little control over that work, boredom, professional disappointments, poor processes or workplace conflicts can be resolved by the manager by reorganizing workflow, giving the individual new responsibilities, assessing processes and engaging in conflict resolution.

An individual with good coping skills will clearly communicate their concerns, ask for help or create solutions to their problems. Those who lack the ability to cope with workplace issues will often become frustrated, angry, irritable and resistant.

Involving the employee in ways to resolve the issues, coupled with some managerial coaching and assistance from outside resources available through the company's EAP, can go a long way to improving the situation.

Personal Problems

Although we all try to leave our personal problems at home, the reality is that they often spill over into the workplace. Research shows that personal problems can take a significant toll on performance. Someone who is distraught over a marital breakdown, a serious health matter or a financial crisis brings those negative emotions into the workplace. Other employees may find the daily stress of parenting, relationships, eldercare and other personal issues too much to cope with and turn their frustrations onto their work colleagues.

Until the personal issues are resolved, performance and behavioural problems will continue. It's important that the manager direct the individual to the company's EAP for assistance.

Self-esteem

The role of self-esteem cannot be overstated in work performance and interpersonal relationships and a successful manager recognizes the importance of self-esteem in job performance and fosters self-esteem.

In your role as manager, you can promote self esteem in all your team members by:

- Listening to your staff and giving validity to their problems
- Recognizing that most people have the capacity and resources to improve the performance at work
- Respecting the strengths of each team members
- Involving your team members in day-to-day problem solving and decision making
- Allowing communication be a two-way street. For team members to reach their full potential, they feel comfortable asking for help, expressing their concerns, sharing ideas and be able to make mistakes without fear of reprisals
- Fostering concern, trust and professionalism by praising good performance
- Focusing on solutions, not problems

Managing difficult behavior

Before setting out to resolve a behavioural issue, you must determine whether the problem is due to the employee's conduct, your own behaviour, or whether the situation is the result of the organization. Unclear policies, insufficient training and conflicting instructions are not uncommon situations. Has the company clearly communicated visions and values to guide their employees? Does the organization unwittingly promote or reward aggressiveness – the killer instinct – within its own ranks? Do you as a manager encourage creativity and risk taking, then focus on failure? Mixed messages cause frustration and cynicism.

Therefore, the second step to dealing with difficult people is to examine yourself. Failing to listen carefully and not responding to small complaints allows those issues to grow and fester. When we react rather than respond, or become angry when challenged, we contribute to the problem. It's important to keep your moods in check, be consistent and control your emotions – especially anger. Your overall conduct can go a long way in setting the tone for the workplace.

When dealing with a difficult person

- Don't take the behaviour personally
- Don't fight back or try to beat them at their own game. They've been doing this a lot longer than you.
- Don't try to appease them

Even the greatest manager will occasionally confront an individual whose difficult behaviour is not the result of a workplace issue, personal problem or managerial conflict. Your first challenge in such a situation is to reduce the immediate impact of that behaviour. You may elect to take the person aside, listen to their point of view, and then deal with the issue logically, unemotionally and constructively. You never know, that disruptive behaviour may be a cry for help. Your role is to offer understanding and support and to encourage the individual to seek help (for example, from their EAP, family doctor, social agency or religious organization).

On the other hand, if the behaviour is affecting the employee's performance, and the performance of others, then you must enter into a problem-solving mode with the employee and develop an Action Plan. This begins with a performance interview.

The performance interview

Conducting a performance interview requires careful preparation. Begin by collecting essential information such as:

- policies
- job descriptions
- performance standards
- corporate mission, vision and value statement
- any information concerning previous discussions regarding behaviour
- an outline that clearly states the problem, the business reasons the behavioural problem must be resolved and the consequences if the person decides not to change their behaviour
- an agenda outlining the points to be covered

Schedule the meeting as soon as possible after a situation has occurred. A close connection between the event and the meeting reinforces the importance you attach to the problem. Select a location that is private and allows for a confidential discussion and limit the number of people present. In a unionized setting, a union representative usually attends and you may wish to include a representative from Human Resources.

Here are some tips to help ensure the meeting is not confrontational and will address the situation in a business-like and effective manner:

- Relax.
- On arrival, greet the person in a friendly manner, but do not engage in chit-chat. Open up the conversation quickly and get to the point.
- Work from the facts, not what you've been told by others.
- Keep your emotions in check. Remain logical and impartial. Do not react to emotional behaviour but draw the line if the behaviour becomes abusive.
- Focus on the behaviour, not the person.
- Consider language, gender issues and cultural diversity.

- Be polite, tactful and business-like.
- Listen actively. A successful performance interview hinges on good communication. Active listening techniques help establish a climate of co-operation and reduce the potential for misunderstanding. Essentially, active listeners practice clarification, confirmation and paraphrasing techniques. Remember to use "I" statements to diffuse defensive or aggressive responses. Try writing a few "I" statements prior to the meeting as an aid. For example, "Mike, I have a problem and I need your help."
- Discuss the cause and effect of the problem behaviour and ways to deal with it. Ask questions and get information, rather than just stating opinions.
- Agree to what resolutions have been made and make sure the individual understands the consequences if the behaviour continues. Work towards a win-win situation for everyone.
- Finally, schedule a follow-up meeting to finalize the situation.

DO NOT

- Discipline employees in public
- Encourage competition between team members
- Accept rumour or gossip as fact
- Avoid dealing with disruptive behaviour
- Believe poor behaviour goes away if ignored
- Interrupt or finish other peoples' sentences
- Pass the buck
- Discipline when angry or emotionally upset

Promoting positive behavior

Creating a working environment where people are treated fairly and respectfully promotes constructive behaviour. As a manager, you can reduce the possibility of further disruptive behaviour by encouraging openness and being transparent. Openness improves the quality of information and reduces gossip and rumours while transparency promotes understanding and trust and gives opportunities for participation in planning and decision-making.

Good relationships bridge differences between people and foster improved social interaction and responsibility. Such relationships are built on trust. As managers, we must promote trust by acting with integrity and honesty and encouraging those qualities in our staff.

Gaining the respect of your team means being fair and courteous and treating those around you with respect. Not allowing any difficult behaviour that impinges on the mental, emotional or physical health of others maintains a nurturing, supportive work space. If difficult or disruptive behaviour does occur, it should be handled equitably, promptly and without emotion, thus demonstrating that such behaviour is unacceptable.

Good communication is crucial for every organization, but especially during times of change. Regular discussions with your team will reduce anxieties caused by rumours and gossip. Encourage questions, seek out ideas and opinions and give full credit for good ideas.

Conclusion

Managing people with difficult behaviour is not easy, but ignoring the problem will only allow it to worsen and spread. Such behaviour not only poisons the environment it:

- Adversely affects the mental health of others
- Adversely affects the physical health of others
- Reduces enjoyment of the job for colleagues
- Makes you less effective as a manager
- Takes up valuable time
- Turn others into difficult people

In the end, however, the responsibility for changing behaviour is with the individual concerned. If they are unwilling or unable to change and their behaviour continues adversely affecting performance, they must accept the consequences of their disruptive behaviour. In some cases, alternative employment is the only choice. Your role is to provide a process to help the individual explore their difficult behaviour and help them create a mutually acceptable plan for change.

For assistance with, or more information on, managing difficult employees Contact Expert-Aide at 1 866 314-9533 (English service) or 1 866 314-9534 (service en français).

Recommended reading

Perfect Solutions For Difficult Employee Situations

by Sid Kemp

Complete Idiot's Guide To Dealing With Difficult Employees

by John Bacal

201 Ways to Deal With Difficult People (Quick-Tip Survival Guides)

by Alan Axelrod

***Coping with Toxic Managers Subordinates ... and Other Difficult People:
Using Emotional Intelligence to Survive and Prosper***

by Roy H. Lubit

Essential Managers: Dealing with Difficult People

by Christina Osborne

Since Strangling Isn't an Option...:

Dealing With Difficult People-Common Problems and Uncommon Solutions

by Sandra A. Crowe

Managing Employee Performance Problems

by Neville C. Tompkins and Neville C. Tompkins

Working with Emotional Intelligence

By Daniel Goleman



Keeping our word is standard

