

Stopping Employees Who Deliberately Provoke Co-Workers

By Toni Talbot, SPHR

Question: *I have an employee who does a nice job with patients and does quality work. She doesn't do anything that's a violation of any of our office policies, but what she does do is annoy*

her co-workers immensely. It's like she finds out what her co-workers' "hot buttons" are and then seems to enjoy pushing them. I have to listen to the complaints but feel I can't do anything about it. How can I bring some harmony back to my practice?

Answer: It doesn't appear to me that this person is being a team player. That should be an expectation for any practice whether clearly written or not. We all have to work with others, and intentionally making comments or doing things to upset co-workers is simply not an example of teamwork.

Let's look at this situation from a coaching perspective to see if we can make changes in her behavior. We'll need to coach the errant employee as well as the employees whose buttons are being pushed.

First, meet with the button-pusher and ask her point-blank if she actually did the behavior she is being accused of. Initially, she may deny, but you should come equipped with very specific facts that support the accusation. Then start a series of questions as to what she feels she is gaining from such behavior, and force her to answer you. Don't ask why she is doing what she is doing; you don't need to know. Instead, go to her motivation by asking what she expects to gain by her actions. Keep pursuing this line of questioning until she admits she has gained nothing of substance. Then ask her what she is losing by such behavior. Ask what she thinks the impact this behavior has on her co-workers. Ask her how she would feel if she were treated similarly. Ask her what she thinks her co-workers' opinions of her are because of this behavior.

The purpose of all this questioning is to get her to eventually admit the behavior is inappropriate. After she admits, you now have the opening you need to try to get her to agree to discontinue the behavior. This meeting

should be documented and a copy of your notes should be provided to the employee so she knows that you mean business and expect her to follow through with changes she agreed to.

Now you must meet with each employee whose button is being pushed and coach him or her to learn how to better deal with the "button-pusher." Mainly, you need to teach them how to let the irritating behavior roll off their backs, eliminating the hot button altogether. Again, this is best handled by using a series of questions. Start with questions like these: Can you or I control the button pusher? Who can you control? What can you control about your reaction that will reduce the inappropriate behavior? Do you think you can learn to control your reaction?

Again, eventually, the employees should come to the conclusion that they are an integral part of the problem by fueling the fire with their reactions. If they take responsibility for their reactions, then they will eliminate the fuel.

You can expand the coaching sessions for everyone to improve the team environment in the office. Ask questions that direct them to work effectively together, such as: What do you think can be done to improve the teamwork in the practice? What are you doing that helps you be an effective team member? What do you think is preventing us from being a better team? What do you think you need to do to improve the effectiveness of the team? What is preventing you from doing these things? And so on.

One cannot control another person. Telling a person to do something rarely actually changes behavior. The goal of coaching is to influence each employee to change his or her own behavior voluntarily. When you coach employees to change their behaviors, it puts the responsibility squarely on their shoulders, and they decide (eventually) to change their behavior. ♦

