Managing the Personality Disordered Individual:

Recognizing and Responding to Workplace Deviance

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Introduction

Organizations must be aware of the signs of workplace deviance and train managers to identify a personality disordered individual. A toxic work environment can be detrimental to an organization; it is important for management to recognize the signs and respond to these types of individuals who are participating in workplace deviance. Management is challenged by employees whose behaviors does not reflect organizational values; this disconnect can create a hostile or toxic work environment. Workplace deviance includes but is not limited to harassment, emotional assault, bullying, mobbing, and in some cases even violence. When faced with a toxic employee, it is incumbent upon management to take immediate action to mitigate the potential damage that these employees may cause.

By recognizing personality disordered individuals such as the obsessive compulsive, histrionic, antisocial, paranoid, borderline, narcissistic and passive aggressive; managers can minimize contagious negative behavior through active interventions within the organization. By maintaining control and avoiding being defensive, managers can model appropriate behavior in their interactions with a personality disordered individual. A manager who practices self-awareness in response to personality disordered individuals, who is participating in workplace deviance, can positively impact organizational culture.

Workplace Deviance

Workplace deviance is a voluntary behavior that violates significant organizational norms and may threaten the well being of an organization, its members, or both. According to Kapuchinkski (2007), examples of workplace deviance include the acts of personality disordered individuals who “consistently arrive to work late, blame poor performance on someone else’s
inadequacy, pulling morale down, faultfinding, and making you watch your back” (p. 3). Managers are responsible for maintaining the health of their work environment.

Applebaum (2000) noted that individuals may be supported in negative behavior by the organization. An employee who displays deviant behavior in the workplace presents a very real threat to today’s work environment, where the need for employees to be productive and cohesive has never been greater.

According to Appelbaum (2000), “Employee deviance has also been found to be the cause of approximately 30 percent of all business failures” (p. 17). Although not precisely measured, the economic costs of workplace deviance can include (a) psychological and physical illness, (b) absenteeism, (c) turnover, (d) lost productivity through organizational disunity, (e) reduced morale, (f) acts of sabotage, (g) alcoholism, and (h) mental illness.

Those who inflict psychological abuse on their coworkers constitute one of the most common and serious problems facing employees in today’s workplace. Yamada (2000), defined workplace deviance as “the intentional infliction of a hostile work environment upon an employee by a coworker or coworkers, typically through a combination of verbal and nonverbal behaviors” (p. 8). His research found that 60% of the instigators of those behaviors were of higher institutional status.

When surveyed, American employees responded that civility has been lost in the modern workplace, citing five economic and social trends aiding in the increase of deviant behaviors at work:

1. the growth of the service-sector economy
2. the global profit squeeze
3. the decline of unionization
4. the diversification of the workforce

5. increased reliance on contingent workers (Yamada, 2000 p. 88)

According to Bandou and Hunter (2007), “Considering the potential harm that incivility behaviors may inflict upon victims, such behavior can be considered unethical and is not a welcome additive to workplaces, organizations, or academic environments” (p. 13).

There are many ethical implications that arise when this behavior comes to play in the workplace. Thus, there is great incentive, financial and otherwise, for organizations to prevent and discourage any negative workplace deviance within their walls. Managers must be able to recognize the signs of individuals who are displaying workplace deviance behaviors and know how to respond to it.

A major cause of lost productivity in organizations is not due to processes, but rather, is more often caused by dysfunctional interpersonal dynamics. Worley (2005) noted, “Conflict is inherent in groups and organizations and can arise from a variety of sources, including differences in personality, task orientation, goal interdependence, and perceptions among group members, as well as competition for scarce resources” (p. 227). Success and effectiveness are dependent on the synergies that are created when people are in alignment with one another. When people’s attitudes, beliefs, and values are in alignment, their behaviors are supportive of the organization’s missions and goals. When faced with a toxic employee, it is incumbent upon management to take immediate action to mitigate the potential damage that employee may cause.

*Personality Disorder Individuals*

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition, (1994) a personality disorder is a pattern of deviant or abnormal behavior that the person doesn't change even though it causes emotional upsets and trouble with other people at work and in
personal relationships. It is not limited to episodes of mental illness, and it is not caused by drug or alcohol use, head injury, or illness. There are about a dozen different behavior patterns classified as personality disorders by DSM-IV. The personality disorders show up as deviations from normal in one or more of the following:

1. cognition -- i.e., perception, thinking, and interpretation of oneself, other people, and events;
2. affectivity -- i.e., emotional responses (range, intensity, liability, appropriateness);
3. interpersonal functions;
4. impulsivity. (p. 633)

**Personality Disordered Individuals in the Workplace**

More times than not, there will be a person in the organization who has a recognizable personality type who creates conflict. These types of individuals can be described as Personality Disordered Individuals; (PDIs; Kapuchinki, 2007). Some characteristics of a PDI range from charming and personable, to negative and undermining. Two distinct qualities of PDIs are the ability to (a) manipulate and (b) self-centeredness. These qualities allow the PDI personal gain, but overall do not help the organization where they are employed. Their hard work efforts are self-serving, and not in the best interest of the company.

According to Kapuchinski (2007), “Personality disorder begins during late adolescence and continues through adulthood” (p. 2). These behaviors are described as disorders because they are considered out of the norm. The PDI is self-absorbed regarding what is the one right way to proceed, and these individuals do not follow society’s norm. PDIs very much play the victim when any criticism is directed at their actions or suggestions. They are notorious for blaming others and will never take responsibility for their own behavior. Cavaiola and Lavendar (2000)
noted that “individuals with personality disorders often heighten job stress for their coworkers” (p. 7). An example of stress is when a PDI will turn the tables quickly, and will accuse those who are giving the criticism of being the problem.

Personality disordered individuals are routine and consistent with how they respond to various situations, personally and professionally. “People with personality disorders are often one trick ponies, as they seem to respond to life in a stereotypical type of pattern that does not vary from one situation to another. They often do one thing very well to the exclusion of others” (Cavaiola & Lavendar, 2000, p. 28). Similarly, PDIs have a talent of tapping into the feelings and emotions of their coworkers. They know how to access vulnerabilities and switch the conversation away from them. A PDIs goal is to gain control without the other even realizing that it is happening.

According to Kapuchinski (2007), PDIs use feelings, emotions, and reactions against coworkers. They will provoke others. For example, imagine a PDI who is constantly late for meetings. When a manager talks to the individual about it, the employee may make excuses or accuse management of being rigid. This defensiveness might provoke anger in the listener causing the manager to back off the topic. The PDI is adept at provoking a feeling and using it to switch topics.

Unterberg (2003) noted, “It is important to remember the difference between personality traits and disorders. Pronounced personality traits can exist without a personality disorder. Personality disorders exist when there is a distinct pattern of excessive, inflexible and consistently self-destructive personality traits” (p. 2). The impact of these types of personality traits in the workplace can be very significant and become problematic under stress.
Being aware of the seven types of personality disorders, (a) obsessive-compulsive, (b) histrionic, (c) anti-social, (d) paranoid, (e) borderline, (f) narcissistic and, (g) passive aggressive will give managers better insight regarding how to interact and respond to this behavior in the workplace. These types of personality disorders can contaminate the workplace by creating a work culture of alliances that are either for or against them. They often rob time and energy from a manager, and when allowed to continue acting in a negative fashion, present an authentic threat to organizational health.

Conclusion

Workplace deviance and personality disordered individuals can have substantial financial, physical, and psychological consequences. Therefore, understanding workplace deviance and the personality disordered individual is essential for organizations and managers. Organizations that want to reduce the occurrence of workplace deviance must make management aware of how to identify the signs of the personality disordered individual and the effects of workplace deviance. Management cannot ignore workplace deviance because it perpetuates a cycle of rule-breaking that sets a tone for deviant behavior in the workplace.

Today’s increasing competitive business environment and uncertain economy often forces managers to put more pressure on performance and satisfaction. Managers often inadvertently encourage deviant behaviors by pushing employees to meet deadlines, conform to group norms, and perform ambiguous job duties. Litzky (2006) noted, “Preventing deviant behaviors from cropping up is the most cost-effective way to deal with employee deviance” (p. 100). Managers who recognize and respond to personality disordered individuals can reshape the workplace environment and reduce the effects of workplace deviance.


