

Working to get the best out of your employees

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I have an employee who blames other people when things go wrong. At the very best it's an annoying habit. At worst, I can see that it's bad for morale. Worst of all, I'm not sure this employee sees his behavior as a problem. On the other hand, this is a person who does good work, and is capable of doing even more. Do you have any suggestions for me?

The best employees are those who can come forward with a solution, tell you, "Oh, by the way, there was a problem, and here's how we solved it." Next best is the employee you can trust to alert you to problems. Next comes the employee who ends up making excuses and blaming others when things go wrong. The most dangerous employee is the one who covers up, or who can't be counted on to tell you the whole story. Let's take a look at each situation and figure out what to do.

Start with the employee you can count on to come forward with a solution every time. This is a keeper. Make sure you nurture this employee, encouraging him or her to take on additional responsibility. At the same time, don't push this employee to move too fast, or too far out of his or her area of expertise. Even the best employee is likely to have a crisis of confidence if moved from something they're good at to something for which they're unprepared. Sit with this problem solving employee and lay out a growth track, taking into account skills they want to add and opportunities you think would be a good fit. Point out that you appreciate his or her problem solving approach.

Telling you that things are going wrong takes personal confidence. After all, you're the boss and you may react negatively to problems. Be sure that you encourage employees to come forward with issues, not shut them down by showing your level of frustration going up.

Some employees may not be able to consistently approach you with a problem solved. If these employees are willing and able to come forward with issues, they are still valuable to you. Just make sure they don't turn into a tattletale. Keep the employee focused on problems that relate to their work area.

Ask yourself, is this person telling me what I need to know, even if that includes telling me bad news, or is this person just setting up other people to take the fall in order to make themselves look good in comparison. If it's just about sharing bad news, then ask yourself, is this a person who generally sees the glass as half full, and at the moment there's a problem. Or, is this someone who's always complaining that things aren't right? Be careful not to reward the complaining.

Encourage people to come forward with issues, so that the organization can improve. Once they do, ask them what they're going to do to fix things. Encourage them to think through solutions and take action to resolve problems.

Change employees into problem solvers by asking them how they want to solve the problem they raised. Don't let them off the hook with just making a suggestion. Ask them to go implement the solution.

If you find you have an excuse maker for an employee, get that turned around quickly. Tell the employee that you expect them to share the load. Most small businesses are hands on environments, with too few people to delegate to. You can't afford to have a prima donna who says, "I asked so-and-so to take action, but they didn't."

You need people in your organization who are willing to pitch in, if necessary, with enough judgment to know when to step in, and when to guide the people they work with. In either case, the work has to get done, and that means focusing on the endpoint, knowing that the work is taken care of, and stepping up to the plate to help out. Express your concern that they need to follow through and know that work they're responsible for is complete, regardless of who did the work. Watch to see if they get the lesson.

Finally, watch out for cover ups. Employees who are not confident enough to tell you what's going on — are dangerous. Getting accurate reports from your employees is essential. If you find a cover up, confront the employee with the behavior. Tell them a cover up is unacceptable. Don't avoid the situation, deal with it. If you find a second cover up, it's time to move on.

Looking for a good book? Try, *How To Manage Problem Employees: A Step-By-Step Guide for Turning Difficult Employees into High Performers*, by Glenn Shepard.

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