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Start talking . . . keep talking

Many experts agree that the key to turning a borderline employee into a good one is communication — and it should start from the get-go.

“I have found that borderline employees are, more often than not, great employees who have ‘become disillusioned’ due to the work environment,” says Frankie Williams, MAOM, a consultant with Gatto McFerson, a financial services and managing consulting firm for veterinarians. “They start out revved up and eager, but a lack of leadership and coaching can bring on complacency and they become borderline employees. There are instances when the employee is just innately borderline, but if we are using excellent hiring practices, we aren’t hiring borderline employees.”

Laurie Taylor, an international business speaker, business growth specialist and president of FlashPoint!, says there’s a disconnect when the hiring manager doesn’t clearly outline what the expectations are for the employee in the job interview.
"In normal interviews, we spend a lot of time asking questions about an employee’s work experience and about his or her background. We ask questions like, ‘What was your favorite part of your job?’ or ‘What did you like about your manager?’ Maybe toward the end of the process we talk about what the job entails,” she says. “In our interviewing process, we need to be much better at identifying the tasks, the skills and the expectations that the employee needs to be held accountable to before we even hire that person.”

Get it on paper

Bob Levoy, seminar speaker and author of 222 Secrets of Hiring, Managing, and Retaining Great Employees in Healthcare Practices, says that two documents are necessary to help minimize borderline job performance in the early stages of employment: a written job description detailing the duties and responsibilities of the position and an employee handbook.

“The job description helps simplify the hiring process and ensures that employees know what’s expected of them; it provides managers with a guideline for performance reviews,” Levoy says.

“The employee handbook also helps eliminate misunderstandings, because employees know up front what’s expected of them,” he explains.

A typical employee handbook should include information about job performance standards, training periods, termination policies, severance pay, benefits, confidentiality, overtime, performance evaluations, salary reviews, dress codes, work schedules, punctuality, absenteeism, vacations, sick leave, family and medical leave and the rules regarding substance abuse, smoking, safety, and sexual harassment.

“And it can go on from there,” Levoy says. “It might cover such matters as general etiquette with clients or co-workers or telephone etiquette, like, ‘All calls have to be answered on the third ring,’ or calling clients and pets by name. Again, if employees will read and understand this up front, it prevents a lot of the behavioral problems.”

According to Levoy, even businesses with existing employee handbooks may need to update them to address the growing problem of employees abusing computer privileges.

“The use of computers for Internet surfing and sending emails to friends and checking Facebook to see what’s up on the ‘wall’ and what have you — that’s all eliminated because you have the rules to go by. So it makes any intervention on your part have a basis — a benchmark,” he says.

Containing the “ripple effect”

Despite such well-defined, up-front expectations, borderline employees can still develop.

“To me, borderline employees are defined in this way: They’re not quite bad enough to fire but not quite good enough to get you excited,” says Chester Elton, co-author of The Carrot Principle.

“When you walk in and see them, what is your first thought? Is it, ‘I’m so glad to see you!’ or ‘Ohhhh . . .’?”

Elton says that it is important to address the problem immediately because of the effect it can have on the other employees.

“I’m really convinced that great organizations are built out of great teams,” Elton suggests. “Employees are not valuable if they detract from the team.”

If a borderline employee is allowed to get away with his or her weak job performance, it can lead to resentment by coworkers if they seem to be the exception to the rule.

“Now you don’t have one marginal employee — the whole team becomes a problem because of that ripple effect,” Elton states.

To deal with the situation, Elton maintains that communication with employees must be frequent, specific and timely.
For example, if a borderline employee is great with clients but habitually late to work, the manager should give reasons why it’s important to be on time.

“Say, ‘Tomorrow I really need you here right at 9:30, because Mrs. Wilson is bringing in her two terriers and there’s no way that one person can handle both of them.’”

When the employee comes in on time, the manager should then acknowledge the employee’s prompt arrival. Frequent reinforcement of desirable behavior also can make a difference, such as saying a simple, “Thank you for being here to help.”

When to take action

If the tardiness becomes habitual, however, “Then you’ve got to pull the employee aside and say, ‘Look, this job really requires that you be here at 9:30. So if you really can’t do it, then we’re going to need to think of a way to transition’ — which is a really nice way of saying ‘fire you,’” says Elton.

“If you ever fire somebody and he or she is surprised, that’s your fault,” Elton maintains. “Communication is key. Be very frank, be very truthful and be very up front about what the problem is and what the consequences are going to be. Give the employee every opportunity to live up to that, but if he or she can’t do it, you’ve got to let the person go.”

Taylor says that employers are often hesitant to fire mediocre employees and keep them on for much longer than they should out of a sense of loyalty or concern over having to replace them with someone who requires a larger salary.

And if the employer does discuss the problem with the employee, the most common excuse is along the lines of, “I didn’t realize I was doing my job in a way that upset you.” To help such
One-on-one weekly conversations can be crucial when a normally good employee begins to slip into borderline work habits. Employees improve, Taylor also advocates open dialogue.

“I encourage anyone who manages people to meet for 30 minutes every week with every direct report (the people they manage),” she says.

At this meeting, the manager should ask three questions:

- What did you do last week that you were really proud of?
- What would you like to do or learn next week that will help make your job better?
- How can I help you?

“When I get a manager to do that each week, after 30 to 60 days, the change in that relationship is amazing,” Taylor claims. “It breaks down the barrier that exists between a manager and an employee.”

Keep them (and yourself) focused

Williams concurs that one-on-one weekly conversations are vital and can be crucial in identifying when a normally good employee begins to slip into borderline work habits.

“If staff managers are regularly talking to the line employees, they have a better handle on behavioral changes. This also makes it easier to have a courageous conversation with the employee,” she says.

Essentially, with frequent and positive interaction, managers can keep an open line of communication with employees without micromanaging, which can lead to resentment and paranoia. Instead, most borderline employees will feel valued and strive to do their best.

“What I believe is that every employee comes to the table wanting to succeed,” Taylor says. “The bottom line is, you’ve got to focus on your people.”

Jen Reeder is a freelance journalist who specializes in the environment, health and travel. She lives in Denver, Colo.
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\(^1\) Zhao X, Yeh JZ, Salgado VL, Narahashi T. Fipronil is a potent open channel blocker of glutamate-activated chloride channels in cockroach neurons. *J Pharm Exp Ther* 2004;310(1):192-201.


\(^3\) Data on file at Merial TS-USA-28701.


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