

# The 7 Most Disruptive Workplace Issues

## And How to Handle Them

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PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT



# Contents



- Prima donnas
- Know-it-alls
- Acidic attitudes
- Personal issues
- Chronic tardiness and absenteeism
- Workplace romance
- Gossip and rumors

# The 7 Most Disruptive Workplace Issues And How to Handle Them

No matter how things change – advances in technology, shifting markets, variable economic conditions – one truth remains: People are the engines that drive business.

That's the beauty and the beast of the system.

Companies rely on employees to soar to new heights, birthing new ideas and finding innovative ways to enhance and lift performance.

In the bargain, employers have to deal with the whole unwieldy spectrum of human behavior. And it's not always easy.

What follows is a very useful discussion of the most problematic workplace situations – and how to handle them.

They are:

- prima donnas
- know-it-alls
- employees with acidic attitudes
- personal issues
- chronic tardiness and absenteeism
- romance in the workplace, and
- rumors and gossip.

## ■ **Prima donnas**

They are, quite possibly, the most irritating people in the workforce.

They preen, they posture, they bully, they make outrageous demands.

And much of the time, those demands are met.

They are the prima donnas. The hardest part is, they're often the company's best performers.

Of course they are. How else could anybody justify keeping them around for so long, alienating staff and creating chronic headaches?

## A field guide to prima donnas

The challenge with this particular breed is that its members come in all shapes, sizes, personality types and degrees of quirkiness.

There's:

- **Joe (or Josephine) Cool.** These folks are urbane, confident, knowledgeable – and never miss a chance to point it out to co-workers or superiors. They don't bother with the nitty-gritty details of the work. That's for the rest of the staff.
- **Vincent (or Vivian) Van Gogh.** So creative, these people can't possibly be expected to follow the rules of the drones that surround them. Their work is impeccable – but it's rarely done on time, and it invariably causes fits for the people who actually have to face the consequences of missed deadlines.
- **The Founding Father (or Mother).** These are the folks who've been around forever – through the good times and the bad. They hold a special place in the hearts of their colleagues, and they're the main repository of institutional memory. Problem is, they think they've paid their dues – and don't have to produce anymore. They pick and choose their assignments – and everybody else has to pick up the slack.
- **Conan (or Connie) the Barbarian.** The office bully. The living, breathing rebuttal to the idea that when employees are treated with respect, they're more productive. He or she gets results. Sure, everybody in the department is miserable. And the turnover rate is way higher than other departments. But the results speak for themselves, right?

## Two personality traits worth noting ...

Obviously, these are only a sample of potential prima donnas.

Regardless of which category they fall into, all prima donnas have two traits in common: They're not team players, and they're almost always obsessed with themselves.

But they are rarely as self-confident as they want people to believe. In those two traits lies a blueprint for dealing with them.

## ... and a two-phase plan to deal with them

Phase I: It's a team issue.

There is no "I" in "we." Managers must make it clear that cooperating with co-workers and being part of a collegial atmosphere isn't an optional exercise. It's required.

But what incentive do prima donnas have to follow the team guidelines? Why not make it part of the compensation package?

When a change in behavior means money in the pocket, prima donnas tend to pay attention.

Phase II: Prima donnas need to feed their egos.

That's a double-edged sword. Giant egos can be destructive in a workplace setting – but they can also be steered toward positive outcomes.

Example: Some companies co-opt prima donnas by making them key players in mentoring programs, where they can shine light on their accomplishments while developing new talent.

Others find success by assigning the prima donna an important new initiative – such as a key market research project or a special campaign to land a crucial customer – something that won't require a lot of interaction with co-workers.

## Are they worth keeping? 3 questions

No question, prima donnas are often valuable to companies. Startups especially benefit from the high-powered energy that prima donnas can bring to the table.

But sometimes these employees are simply more trouble than they're worth. And then management has a critical decision to make.

A few questions to ask:

- What's this person's effect on morale? Did good employees jump ship because of this person's behavior?
- How much extra staff time is spent dealing with this person?
- Is he/she really the only employee who can handle this assignment?

The answers will indicate whether it's appropriate to make internal adjustments or end the relationship.

Sometimes, jettisoning the top-performing prima donna may be less painful than managers fear it's going to be.

Other employees (rejoice) step up to fill the vacuum, and morale gets a boost.

There's an old saying: "The cemetery is full of indispensable people." That puts things in in perspective.

## ■ The know-it-all

Few workplace personalities cause more disruption than know-it-alls.

They have an opinion on everything – whether they actually know anything about the topic or not.

Some are loud and boisterous. Others are more reserved and can

slide easily in and out of conversations, leaving frustrated co-workers in their wake.

While they can come in many shapes and sizes, know-it-alls have one thing in common: Because they are programmed to transmit rather than receive, they are usually poor listeners.

Whatever personal style the know-it-all takes, he or she affects morale and productivity by wasting time, shifting focus from important tasks and causing hard feelings with co-workers.

Know-it-alls tend to stifle creativity by hijacking conversations and leaving co-workers with little to say. In time, those co-workers give up interacting with that person altogether.

Sometimes know-it-alls steal people's ideas and claim them as their own.

Other times, when a co-worker is finally able to float a valuable idea, the know-it-all claims everyone already knew that anyway.

The worst know-it-alls are sarcastic and demeaning. They destroy teamwork with constant criticism. These are the know-it-alls who also tend to be office bullies.

### **Irritating, but valuable**

Why do people act like this? Psychiatrists say they're compensating for deep insecurities. But that insight doesn't really help to deal with the workplace problems they cause.

A key point for managers to bear in mind when dealing with know-it-alls: Many of them do, indeed, know a lot.

Most couldn't get to be know-it-alls in the first place if they didn't have some expertise.

So as irritating as these people can be, many do have something to offer.

Good managers try to find out what that is – and then use those capabilities in a positive way.

Here are a few suggestions for dealing with know-it-alls:

- **Take ego out of it.** Sometimes a know-it-all's behavior is so maddening, there is a tendency to discount their ideas. That could be a mistake. Managers should guard against letting their own personal feelings interfere with evaluating the know-it-all's ideas.
- **Study up.** Before sitting down with a know-it-all, study the topic. This type of individual will discount guesswork and assumptions. A manager armed with good evidence and facts has the best chance of making a lasting impression on the know-it-all.
- **Ask clear questions.** When seeking information from know-it-alls, it's important to ask very specific questions. Otherwise, it's too easy for them to tear off on unrelated – and unproductive – tangents.
- **Get others involved.** When a know-it-all is part of a group, be sure to make the discussion round-robin so everyone gets equal airtime.

### Changing the behavior

Here are two points to keep in mind for managers who confront know-it-alls about the negative effects of their behavior:

- **Be upfront about consequences.** This is a tough area, because know-it-alls can be extremely defensive. But in discussions with these employees, managers need to be firm. For example, say, "The way you treat co-workers is having a negative effect on overall productivity and your long-term career potential."
- **Set limits and check up.** It's important to set goals so know-it-alls understand they're expected to change their behavior in order to enhance departmental cooperation. Managers should monitor feedback from the employee's co-workers to gauge the employee's progress.

## ■ Acidic attitudes

Every workplace has negative people who erode morale. They're not always easy to pick out of a crowd.

Most of the time, these folks don't make the big mistakes that call attention to themselves. They're frequently pretty good at their jobs, so they're not called on the carpet too often.

But like a virus running inside a computer program, their acidic personalities eat away at the goals – and ultimately the bottom line – week after week, year after year.

Who are these people? They're the employees who:

- continually find things to complain about and exaggerate the seriousness of co-workers' mistakes
- spread gossip and start rumors that pit employees against each other
- talk behind co-workers' backs, and
- undermine supervisors' authority with a never-ending flow of criticism that stays under the radar so it's rarely recognized and corrected.

It's been said the only way to fix a bad attitude is through psychotherapy, religion or brain surgery. But it's the rare manager who is a shrink, a minister or a neurosurgeon.

Still, every manager needs a strategy to deal with this constant drag on employee attitudes.

The stakes are too high to just let things slide.

### **Looking for answers: Ask 4 key questions**

So what's to be done? The experts say managers should move away from the vague "bad attitude" discussion to the hard facts of employee behavior.

The key questions:

- What's the impact of the employee's behavior?
- How do the person's actions differ from the standards set for overall employee behavior?
- What's the effect of this individual's behavior on the people who work with him/her?
- If this person acted according to our accepted standards, could it make a difference in morale and productivity?

Managers should identify the actions of negative people – and make it clear those actions will no longer be tolerated.

**An example:** A Midwestern company established a “no jerk” policy. It included the statement:

*“Each employee will demonstrate professional behavior that supports team efforts and enhances team behavior, performance and productivity.”*

## Handling tough conversations with acidic employees

Establishing policy is a solid first step. It creates a good framework.

But managers need practical advice that gets results day to day on the front lines.

Some things to consider:

- **Acknowledge the awkwardness.** Managers can let employees know they're providing feedback that's difficult to discuss. It's only human to feel that way.
- **Keep it results-oriented.** A phrase like, “I'm bringing this up because it's important you address this issue to be successful in your job” is helpful.
- **Accentuate the positive.** It's a good idea to highlight the good things that are likely to happen when the person changes the disruptive behavior. On the other hand, if the

person remains defiant, stressing the negative outcome if the person's attitude doesn't change can be effective, too.

It's human nature to want to delay having a tough conversation with an employee with a bad attitude. But that only makes things worse.

And since it is going to be a tough conversation, it's recommended that supervisors prepare for the discussion.

Here are some things to consider during the preparation:

- **Be specific about what you want.** It's a mistake to use general terms in a discussion about a specific behavior problem. For example, a manager can say, "I don't like your attitude. I want you to change it." That's pretty safe, but it could mean anything.

Instead, the manager should say, "It's not helpful the way you talk about our customers behind their backs. It poisons the attitude of the others in customer service. From now on, if you can't say something supportive of a customer, please don't say anything at all."

Managers should try to gather specific examples of negative things the employee has said in the past and use those in the discussion for clarity.

- **Let people rant ... a little.** Once a manager has gotten through discussing the specific behaviors, it's likely the other person is going to feel the need to blow off steam and maybe even mount a defense.

To avoid having people feel like they are on the witness stand, let them rant a bit. It'll help them feel like they are being heard – and in fact they *are* being heard!

Then steer the conversation back to the results you want.

- **Try to use "we."** Work to get across the notion that the issue is a problem for everyone concerned.

A manager can start by saying, “We have a problem,” or “We need to change.” That helps the person realize the behavior is important, without finger-pointing.

- **Avoid using “you.”** Putting all the responsibility on the employee is a conversational black hole that is impossible to escape. The constant use of the word “you,” as in “You have a bad attitude and everyone knows it” is an invitation for a fight.

Instead, try “We need to talk about your attitude.” The point here is, while it is OK to use the word “you,” using it continually in a negative way kills the conversation.

- **Avoid “however” and “but.”** Some managers believe if they lead with a compliment, it’s easier to wade into the problem. That conversation looks something like this: “You’ve done a pretty good job, but ...” and then the manager lowers the boom.

That often angers people and leaves them thinking, “Why can’t he ever just say something positive and leave it at that?”

Consider substituting “and” for “but” and “however” and the conversation is likely to go smoother, as in: “You’re doing a pretty good job and we need to talk about how to get you to show more respect for customers.”

- **Don’t feel as if you have to fill the silence.** In a tense situation a manager may be tempted to fill every gap in the conversation. Don’t.

Stay silent when there’s a lull. Obligate the other person to fill in the silence. It’s surprising the amount of information a manager can get without ever asking a question ... just by remaining silent.

## ■ Personal issues

An employee has body odor – strong enough to make his co-workers cringe from 10 feet away. Problem is, he’s the only

one who doesn't seem to notice.

Another worker favors low-cut blouses and short skirts. She's the source of a lot of comments from other employees. She hasn't picked up on the whispers, though.

Another employee, foreign-born, likes to bring in foods from his homeland, prepare them in the break room microwave and then eat them at his desk. These foods have a very pungent odor and don't look like anything his co-workers have ever seen before, let alone eaten. He's oblivious to the grimaces on the faces of his officemates when he digs into his lunch.

Then there's the case of the two co-workers who can't stand each other. They each do their best to turn their department into an armed camp and everybody's under pressure to side with one or the other.

There's no end to the ways employees can disrupt the workplace with their personal issues. Most of these types of problems aren't mission critical – but they can sure create distractions.

And when employees are distracted, they're not optimally productive.

These situations can be minefields. Handled incorrectly, employers can be looking at charges of discrimination, hostile work environment and other equally thorny legal issues.

### **3 overall guidelines that get results**

Here are some overall guidelines for managers who need to have these uncomfortable conversations with workers:

- **Get to the point quickly, but tread lightly.** It's perfectly OK for managers to acknowledge that these are tough situations for them, too, such as by saying, "I've got to talk to you about a difficult issue, and I'm as uncomfortable as you are. But this is something we need to discuss."
- **Focus on the problem, not the person.** The idea is to get

employees to understand the effect they're having on the overall operation. Be sure to establish the facts of the problem clearly, and that it needs to be addressed quickly.

- **Check for understanding.** Asking employees to repeat the action steps you've agreed on makes sure the outcome of the conversation is crystal clear.

Every workplace issue calls for its own special handling. Suggestions for dealing with two of the toughest:

When people can't seem to get along ...

Managers need to:

- address the brewing conflict as early as possible
- stick to the role of "outside party"
- emphasize the importance of coming to a resolution, not placing blame
- focus on their department's common goals, and
- let employees know it's OK to disagree with one another – it's just not OK to let the conflict affect productivity.

### **Body odor, dress issues, etc.**

These are the toughest confrontations of all. Managers should remember to:

- make it a performance issue: "Your (lack of hygiene, inappropriate dress, odiferous lunches) is distracting co-workers from their jobs," and
- stay away from indirect hints about the problem – like leaving a can of deodorant in the workspace of an employee who has a body odor problem.

### **■ Chronic tardiness and absenteeism**

It is rule No. 1 in the workplace: Employees need to show up to do their jobs.

Yet many organizations deal with absenteeism rates of 10% or more – putting extra pressure on other employees, slowing productivity and taking a day-by-day bite out of the bottom line.

Identifying the reasons for the problem is an essential first step.

## 1. Generation gap

A lot's been written about the work ethic (or lack thereof) of Generations X and Y. They just don't have the same drive to succeed that Baby Boomers brought to the job, some observers say. They're too self-absorbed.

## 2. Loyalty gap

Others claim that since companies aren't as loyal to employees as they used to be, workers' loyalty has eroded, too. People don't have the bond with employers they had in decades past; missing a workday isn't a big deal.

## 3. 21st-century stress

Research has shown that stressful working conditions, along with increased pressure to be more productive, push tardiness and absenteeism rates higher.

Along with that, there are stress-related diseases, like heart and depression issues, which also increase work time missed.

Truth is, a combination of forces factor into absenteeism rates. According to recent research, many organizations with absenteeism problems face some or all of the following issues:

- heavy workloads, with long hours and infrequent breaks
- negative social environment between supervisors and workers
- limited worker involvement in everyday decision-making
- inadequate communication throughout the organization

- lack of opportunity for job advancement or promotion
- employees unsure of the company's future, and
- unpleasant physical surroundings.

### Tools of the trade

Here's the one thing that seems certain: Employees who are engaged and challenged, who feel they're given the opportunity to do their best and will be recognized and rewarded for it – these are the workers who show up every day.

So good management is key. But it's likely there will always be a subset of employees who'll have attendance problems. That's why smart companies have absenteeism policies that set strict guidelines about number and frequency of allowed days missed, and the penalties for violating those guidelines.

Here are a few other weapons to use:

- **The written word.** Writing up an employee before he or she exceeds absenteeism limits can be an effective deterrent.  
  
A memo covering the employee's absence record – along with a detailed explanation of what will happen if the pattern continues – is often sufficient to get the worker back on track.
- **Varying pay scales.** Some firms offer different rates of pay for workers with perfect attendance.  
  
Employees who work a full week's schedule are paid one hourly rate; workers with unexcused absences are paid a lower rate.
- **Periodic cash drawings.** Employers hold a raffle for a small cash prize. Only employees who've had perfect attendance are eligible.
- **Periodic bonuses and awards.** Money talks – and annual, quarterly or monthly attendance awards have proven effective absenteeism-busters for many employers.

Small prizes, like gift certificates or movie tickets, also get results.

- **The irritating phone call.** This seems like the tactic of last resort – not to mention expensive – but some companies actually call chronically absent or tardy employees and remind them to come to work.

The prerecorded calls, made a couple hours before the shift starts, go something like this: “Hello. This is (supervisor’s name). You are continually late, or absent. I’ll keep making this call until the problem is solved. Thank you for your cooperation.”

## ■ Workplace romance

What can companies do to prevent romantic relationships between employees? Although some firms have strict anti-fraternization policies, the real-world answer is – not much.

As long as people spend time together at work, romance is a distinct likelihood. Research indicates a significant number of married people met their spouses on the job – probably not surprising, considering how much time people spend at work.

Many employers realize a blanket ban on employee dating is unnecessary and unworkable. But the company should have a framework or policy for managing those relationships.

For the most part, employers steer clear of regulating workplace relationships until they present some kind of problem for individual, team or organizational productivity.

No doubt, employee dating can carry some undesired consequences: If a relationship goes sour, the breakup can lead to charges of sexual harassment, retaliation and hostile work environment. Other times it’s just a matter of hard feelings and people take sides, further polarizing the workplace.

Even if the pairing goes well, it could lead to charges of favoritism from other employees.

Here's the latest thinking on workplace dating policies:

### **Supervisor/subordinate relationships**

Not too tough to spot the pitfalls here: The boss and a direct report begin a relationship. From the moment the pair is exposed as a couple, every move the manager makes is suspect in the eyes of other department workers.

Although some employers flat-out ban manager/employee dating, many feel that's too Big Brother – and if a top performer breaks the rules and must be fired, the organization suffers. So the company's penalized for preventing problems that might never have come up.

**Best practice:** Set up a policy that requires supervisors who become involved with a subordinate to report the relationship to upper management as early as possible.

This gives management the chance to transfer one of the parties (usually the subordinate) to another department. With that, the potential for charges of favoritism or special treatment is eliminated.

### **Manager training**

Addressing a situation when two employees start seeing each other is not often a manager's favorite issue to deal with. First, it can feel like an invasion of privacy – after all, aren't two grown-ups entitled to conduct their romantic lives however they choose?

Second, emotions are involved. That's often slippery ground for supervisors who are far more comfortable with cut-and-dried topics like production numbers and scheduling.

Nonetheless, it's an issue that's got to be faced. Office relationships are often the focus of intense discussion – which can lead to workplace distractions and even unprofessional conduct on the part of co-workers.

Better to get everything out in the open. Managers must make sure both the romantic partners and their co-workers understand that cooperation and productivity expectations remain unchanged, no matter how personal relationships may develop.

## Employee training

Managers aren't the only ones who need to be aware of the rules surrounding workplace romance – their staffers do, too.

Organizations that don't provide guidance about employee relationships do so at their own risk.

While it may not warrant formal training, smart companies give employees a heads-up on the kind of conduct that's acceptable.

A couple of examples:

- management expects both parties to perform their job duties to the same standards as any other employee – meaning that getting a romantic partner to “cover” for the other party or swapping tasks without permission is not acceptable
- employees are banned from displays of affection at work, which can make co-workers uncomfortable. Such displays qualify as unacceptable and unprofessional behavior.

## Stay vigilant

Naturally, these rules apply to relationships that are truly consensual.

HR should monitor these situations closely, because it's possible that a supposed consensual relationship isn't what it seems – like when a person is forced to “date” a supervisor as a condition of keeping his or her job.

If such a situation is uncovered, the company should immediately begin its normal sexual harassment investigation process.

## ■ Rumors and gossip

There's virtually no workplace phenomenon as potentially damaging as rumors and gossip.

People like to talk. For some, it's what they do best.

So rumors and gossip are as common to the workplace as time clocks and water fountains.

Even gossip that seems positive on the surface ("Did you hear that Mary Ellen is pregnant again?") can become potentially damaging. At its root, gossip is communication (it could be talk, but it could also be e-mail or IMs or Tweets) that's meant to pump up one person or group at the expense of another.

Sometimes workplace gossip is simply people's attempt to fill in the blanks about the reasons for organizational decisions when the true reasons aren't publicly known.

In either case, it's corrosive and costly in several ways.

Gossip:

- wastes time and productivity
- erodes trust in the workplace
- distracts people from the job at hand
- ruins morale, and
- creates a toxic work environment.

What's worse, gossip can trigger legal issues – like harassment and bias claims.

Not exactly the kind of thing employers are looking for in today's tough, competitive climate. Unfortunately, uncertain times often spark a rise in employee gossip. Fear can make people strike out at their co-workers and employers.

## Interrupting the transmission

Dealing with gossip can be extremely difficult, because offenders may seem to be “perfect” employees – they come to work on time, they do their jobs, they follow the rules.

But behind the scenes, they’re eating away at company morale.

Smart managers know they can’t stop the rumor mill, but they can counter its effects with accurate information.

Here are three ideas that work:

- Improve company communication. Gossip and rumors thrive in an information vacuum. If there’s a lot of uncertainty about what’s going on in the company – and no word of explanation from above – it’s a safe bet that employees will come up with theories of their own.

Companies can’t over-communicate today. It puts a far greater burden on management, but the current uncertainty of the workplace demands a constant, consistent flow of guidance for workers.

- Get managers on board. Sometimes, unwittingly, managers aid and abet the gossip process. They should adopt the practice of cutting rumors off at the first opportunity. They can say, “I’m sorry, but I don’t think talking about this is productive or fair. Let’s wait until we find out what the real story is.” If it’s gossip about an individual, a sensible response is, “I don’t talk about anybody unless they’re standing in front of me.”
- Establish consequences. The company probably already has a policy outlining employees’ personal responsibility for acting in a way that positively affects team and organizational performance. The act of spreading harmful rumors and gossip qualifies as a violation of that policy – and should be grounds for beginning the progressive discipline process.

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