

MANAGING A CHRONIC COMPLAINER

By Beverly Smallwood

Dear Dr. Bev,

I am supervising an employee who is a chronic complainer. She is negative about most everything. Before I can respond and try to fix a problem, she is in my voice mail or email saying it's useless and nothing will happen anyway. She thinks everyone in the office hates her and is talking about her. She is always apologizing to everyone, emailing people, and just recently calling other employees at home to talk about how they don't like her.

She will act inappropriately one day and the next say things like her medications were off, or she could not afford them. She medicates/mixes her prescription drugs, sometimes using more than she should.

I believe she does things to garner attention. Even if the attention is negative, at least it's attention. One day she is fine, the next day she is a martyr, doing things she has not been asked to do, while getting behind on her own duties. She complains she is not given extra work, and if I do give her any extra, she complains aloud to anyone within earshot.

I have tried everything possible to help her. I listen, encourage, and try to make helpful suggestions. While I like this person very much, I am wearing down. I can't seem to win her. She accuses me of favoring others. I try very hard to be fair.

The team is breaking down because, although everyone likes this person and would do anything to help her, they are all fed up.

The employee meets the job expectations and in my opinion does a good job, but the behavior has got to go. My boss wants to meet with both of us to lay it on the line with her on Wednesday. How can I minimize the fallout? This person is not very rational, and no matter how positive we try to make this, I feel she will walk away seeing this as, we are all out to get her.

How can I help her and end all this?

Dr. Bev's comments:

It sounds like you have an employee with some rather serious emotional problems. She's put herself in the role of the chronic victim, and as you've learned from hard experience, this is very hard to deal with. No matter what you do, she takes the most negative view of the situation, and it's never enough.

Quit beating yourself up for not being able to give her enough encouragement and suggestions to make a difference. This is not your fault.

I'm impressed by the fact that you and the other team members have been able to maintain any kind of positive attitude toward this person. That's not easy when you're dealing with a habitual complainer.

You say she meets your job expectations and does a good job. Does she really? Maybe she does the technical parts of her job well, but isn't effective team behavior also a part of the job description? Isn't it an essential part of the job to communicate well with others? Is she in direct contact with customers? Do you think her mental habits and verbal behaviors come through to them?

What I'm suggesting is this. Redefine what "doing her job" means, in preparation for your meeting with her. Be ready to describe her behavior, giving specific incidents. Tell her how her behaviors are impacting the team, how complaining instead of problem-solving robs the team of valuable time and solutions. Then be ready to describe to her what you would want her to do instead, and tell how that will bring a better outcome. Describe each one of the behaviors, giving specific incidents and examples... e.g., complaining, then complaining about your suggestions or your attempts to respond; calling team members at home with questions and accusations. Then follow the steps I've outlined.

Make no mistake about it. What you have described to me definitely is job performance. It should be treated as such.

In the future, when she comes to you with a problem, ask her for her ideas for solutions. As it is, you've been giving a solution, and she immediately shoots it down. If she has no ideas, send her away to think about it, inviting her to return when she has some options in mind.

Your employee needs some professional help. You suspect abuse of drugs. What is the behavior that gives you that impression? Her statements? If you have solid evidence about this, use the same process of discussion I have described to confront the situation. In any case, this person needs help to overcome the emotional and interpersonal problems she has, and she probably won't be able to do that without some counseling.

Does your company offer an Employee Assistance Program? If so, I would definitely recommend a referral. If not, you may locate competent resources in your area and share the names and phone numbers of a couple of professionals. If she's already seeing someone (as your reference to being on meds suggests), strongly encourage her to discuss these things with her therapist.

How will she react to all of this? Probably not very well, honestly. Yes, she'll probably use all of this as more evidence to herself that you're against her. You know that you're not. You're doing all you can to give her every chance and to help her change. Being a good supervisor can mean that you won't always be popular with your people. Sometimes you have to do things that aren't easy. This woman has taken a lion's share of your time and mental energy. You have a responsibility to be fair to all the others.