

# Dealing with Difficult Employees - While Keeping Your Sanity in Check

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We all have seen them and we've all had to work with them... Difficult employees! Face it, as long as you are interacting with human beings in the workplace, there will be those who you adore, are independent and really get the job done. And then there will be those—who won't. As a leader in your organization, you need to harness in the “problem children” both to ensure they can be productive and that you won't pull your hair out while they work for you. The following three suggestions can help you minimize the impact of difficult employees, from the very start—at the point of hiring.

## **TIP #1: Clarify Expectations.**

Develop and implement a hiring system to hire the best employees. Develop meaningful job descriptions & job guidelines. Develop job and performance guidelines. Have an employment handbook which describes employment and conduct standards. ***If it's not written down, it's not clarified!***

## **TIP #2: Train Your Employees in your Expectations.**

Provide new hire training. Provide job training. Provide ongoing, periodic training for your employees as it relates to job and conduct standards. Don't assume that your employees “know what they should do” (ex: telephone etiquette). Train and invest in your employees. Training your employees is a key, strategic advantage for your company. ***Tell them what you are going to teach them, teach them, and tell them what you taught them.***

## **TIP #3: Maintain Accountability with your Employees.**

Let employees know what and when they are doing right and wrong. Be timely in your feedback. Ensure that you have a fair and timely performance appraisal system in place. Have periodic conversations (with written follow-up). Maintain written records about conversations and discussions. Reward whenever possible, counsel/rehabilitate when needed, terminate when needed/justified. ***Three Rules for Accountability: Documentation, Documentation, Documentation!***

Another strong instrument in a leader's tool belt is mastering the skill of matching your leadership style to the maturity of the people you are leading. The *Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership Theory* states “that instead of using just one style, successful leaders should change their leadership styles based on the maturity of the people they're leading and the details of the task. Using this theory, leaders should be able to place more or less emphasis on the task, and more or less emphasis on the relationships with the people they're leading, depending on what's needed to get the job done successfully.” This theory specifies the four leadership styles are defined as:

- ***Telling (S1)*** – leaders tell their staff what to do and how to do it.
- ***Selling (S2)*** – leaders provide information and direction and “sell” their message to get people to take action.

- **Participating (S3)** – leaders focus more on the relationship with their staff vs. the direction of their work. The leader and the team share in the decision-making process.
- **Delegating (S4)** – leaders pass the majority of the responsibilities for task to the staff. The leader monitors progress but are not closely involved with decisions.

These styles show the progression of where employees may start, using the Telling style, and where you as the leader, hope to move them to—the Delegating style. The chart below shows just such an evolution:

## ***The Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership Theory***



***Supportive Behaviors relate to people management***  
***Directive Behaviors relate to task management***

To complete the discussion of the Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership theory, knowing when to use each style is largely dependent on the maturity of your employees:

- **M1** – staff at this level lack the knowledge and skills to work on their own and often need to be pushed.
- **M2** – staff here are may be willing to do the work but still are not fully equipped to do it on their own.
- **M3** – staff at this level are ready, willing and generally able to complete their tasks but they are not confident in their capabilities.
- **M4** – staff here work independently, are committed to their tasks and are confident in their skills.

Therefore, a mapping of appropriate leadership style to staff maturity level is as follows:

Maturity Level	Most Appropriate Leadership Style
M1: Low maturity	S1: Telling/directing
M2: Medium maturity, limited skills	S2: Selling/coaching
M3: Medium maturity, higher skills but lacking confidence	S3: Participating/supporting
M4: High maturity	S4: Delegating

Regardless of how effective you are as a leader, you will always have difficult employees to manage. Using the leadership styles above, the following chart can help you identify your “problem employee”, how to respond to him/her and what type of leadership style might work best for your interactions.

## Classic Difficult Employees

Employee Who Is the...	Respond...	Consider...
Undecider	Deadlines, Default Decisions	Coaching
Ultra-Competitor	Redirect/Reward the Team, Establish and Boundaries, Demand Compliance, Demand Niceness, Demand Respect	Directing, Supporting
Drama Queen/King	Set limits for listening, Redirect/Reward TEAM, Establish Boundaries, Demand Compliance, Demand Niceness, Demand Respect	Delegating, Supporting
Volcano	Set up Boundaries for Behavior, Eject from meetings where behavior is obstructive, Demand compliance/niceness/respect	Delegating, Directing
Iconoclast	Aim this person at the right enemy, channel this person, great customer advocate	Delegating
Droner	Have a written agenda, cut the person off, move things along. Suggest things be taken “off-line”	Coaching
Social (Networking) Butterfly	Assign daily/weekly measurables, limit social media access, show reports of unproductivity	Coaching, Directing
Procrastinator	Good old fashioned micromanagement, implement milestones, create consequence for missed deadlines.	Directing
Creative Genius	Give lip service to the greatness, assist with breaking the project into bite sized pieces, consult with person on each chunk, lot of ego massaging. Care and feeding.	Delegating, Supporting
Panic Button	Create early warning systems, be available for venting, use a white board to brainstorm with the person, hear them out, give them a mental day to recover.	Supporting, Coaching

Bottom line – they’re out there, you’ll have to manage them, and they won’t make it easy. The better you understand them and how they work/think, the more effective you can be in managing them and ensuring your projects will succeed.