

# Keeping the Peace

**A**hhh, workplace divas... always expecting the rest of us to cater to their every whim. And slackers, well, who doesn't just love them?

Constantly shirking responsibility and making excuses. Of course, let's not forget those ever-respected pushovers – afraid to stand up for themselves, never knowing when to say “enough is enough.” But perhaps the most cherished of all people in the office is the good old-fashioned bully. Why life just wouldn't be the same without her intimidating, hurtful ways.

I hope you can sense the sarcasm behind my sentiments. These types of personalities exist in almost every organization – and they drive us nuts. Their antics keep co-workers constantly running for cover. As managers, we can't run; we have to deal with them and their constant drama head-on. But there is good news. While you may not be able to change the personalities of the players on your team, you can take back control. As a manager, you hold the key to keeping the peace. And using that key begins with understanding the one element that drives obnoxious, over-bearing, and just plain bad behavior: the ego.



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We all have egos. They keep us from thinking either too highly or too little of ourselves. They're part of what gives us the self-confidence to succeed. And they drive our need to be recognized for our accomplishments. This is all perfectly normal. But what happens when someone's ego goes too far in one direction or the other? You end up with either a true egomaniac or an insecure wallflower. Either way, these exaggerations in ego can be extremely damaging to any workplace environment. To complicate matters, there lies a hidden irony beneath all this: those with such high-maintenance or challenging egos also tend to be your top talent. While these people can wear your patience thin, the good news is that, most of the time, it's worth it. Think about it. Your “diva” salesperson who takes over every discussion and tries to grab the spotlight, but maintains peak sales numbers quarter after quarter with her confidence and charisma. Your “slacker” program manager who constantly falls behind on documentation and reports, but who comes through time and time again when you're in a pinch. Then there's the department “bully” – your administrative assistant who continually criticizes other people's ideas, but, boy does she take charge to keep you on schedule!

Yes, these high-performing employees will test your patience and, at times, your sanity. While you know full well they are too valuable to cut loose, it's

truly a challenge to lead them. So what can you do to get these folks to perform “at their best” and “on their best behavior” at the same time?

The researchers at Crain's Chicago Business seem to have found the answer. In 2007, they surveyed a selection of managers who handle larger-than-life personalities: opera divas, ego-intense news anchors and physicians, and highstrung clients in the bridal industry. What researchers discovered is that there is, in fact, a common set of skills and qualities among those who are able to most effectively manage high-maintenance egos. So grab your lasso. It's time to rein in those tough employees – and take back control. According to Crain's, here's what you need to get the job done:

## **Take the time to understand the values, perceptions, backgrounds, and motivations of your difficult employees**

Talk with the individual to get to know them on a personal level. You may be surprised at what you learn; perhaps the puzzle pieces will come together explaining his or her ego issue. If anything, you'll at least gain some insight as to what motivates that person. And, by understanding what motivates them, you'll be able to offer the right incentives – praise, bigger challenges, training opportunities, etc. – to get that person to behave the way you want them to.

## **Demonstrate genuine respect for those you lead**

Even if you have trouble truly understanding an employee's motivations, do your best to at least respect the fact that a variety of personalities and viewpoints make an organization versatile and successful. Show your respect by making it clear to the person that you truly appreciate their contribution to your organization. Promote trust among your staff SARAH KLEIN, writing for Workforce Management, covered the Crain's survey

and found that the best ego managers were those who established credibility simply “by being transparent about their goals.” The ‘what you see is what you get’ approach promotes trust, and trust will go a long way in building a healthy relationship with even the most difficult-to-manage person.

Use “coaching,” not discipline, as a key to soothing the savage beast. Discipline is not necessarily the best strategy when dealing with high-maintenance egos. Oftentimes, disciplinary action can amplify the negative behavior. Likely, the employee will feel as though they’re being attacked, which will only put them on the defense, escalating the situation. Instead, take a more passive approach to managing through “coaching.” According to author and management coach PETER ADEBI, “(Coaching) is an effective, non-threatening, non-punitive way of enabling individuals to discover and develop their strengths, come to grips with their opportunity areas or weaknesses, and take carefully outlined steps to address the weaknesses.” The key here is to make a high-maintenance person feel as though they are receiving guidance and support, not discipline.

Here’s a valuable coaching tip – Don’t wait too long to “coach” an employee. It’s better to nip the bad behavior in the bud immediately. Consider making coaching and guidance an on-going service at your company (or at least in your department). According to ADEBI, this allows the company as a whole, “a way to develop talent, enhance leadership skills, identify, acknowledge, and resolve weaknesses, and ultimately to enable employees to be optimally successful.” At the end of the day, your job is to provide the guidance and support the employees need to be most effective at their job. Don’t worry about trying to change anyone, just modify how you react to and work with them. While it may not be an easy task, remember: you hold the key to keeping the peace.

