

Reader Question:

I have an employee who has changed a lot over the last few months – and it's not a good change. He personalizes everything... he's resentful of even constructive criticism. He's angry constantly. Not only does he not get along with other key members, he intimidates them. I'm worried about possible volatile actions. What do I do?

Answer:

The key in this situation is that the employee has “changed a lot.” The assumption would be that he used to be a productive and worthwhile worker and now is causing significant upheaval. Of course, the major concern is about the degree to which he may pose a threat of violence to other people or to property. Many large companies have policies in place that define procedures when there is a perceived threat, but smaller businesses usually are caught off guard. If a specific threat has been made, then you must consult your labor attorney and possibly law enforcement. When there is no imminent threat, actions must be taken to avoid costly litigation in the case that the employee must be terminated – especially if the employee identifies himself as part of a protected class.

In this specific instance, it is quite possible he has had underlying problems with rigidity and anger that may not have surfaced until now. Consistent with the old saying... “A good offense is the best defense,” his hostile behavior pushes people away as it serves as a protective barrier; grounds for excusing sub-par performance or a reaction to perceived slights. Intimidation is a way to make sure others do not force him to face his own failings and, perhaps, fears. It is interesting that this type of employee is often unaware of how badly others see them and deny that there have been any problems going on around them. This is the time for referral to a qualified professional.

Several other issues aside from basic personality must be considered to understand the reasons for negative alterations in his behavior. Has there been a change in this individual's work environment? Factors such as addition or subtraction coworkers, modification of job responsibilities, loss of status or the introduction of a new supervisor could be root causes. Further, he may be suffering from some personal distress – depression, physical illness including early signs of dementia or family conflict – which may adversely impact his ability to perform essential job functions. Increased use of alcohol or drugs also could be contributing to his amplified level of hostility by lessening his degree of self-control. Any one of these variables may create individualized chaos that taxes the worker's ability to adapt.

The goal is to accurately assess what is really going on. This should be done as a team effort between responsible parties at the work site and someone trained to do Fitness for Duty/ Threat Assessments. Although a psychologist or psychiatrist often conducts this type of assessment, the focus is on the dysfunctional behaviors as they relate to the work setting, not the diagnosis of a mental problem. A job description and some form of

narrative regarding the aberrant acts must be provided at the time of referral. Feedback to the employer would consist of information only relevant to the individual's capacity to work without incident and should include recommendations for accountability and accommodation if appropriate. Possible interventions might include psychotherapy/counseling, medication or specific educational programs such as anger management as well as a proscribed period of time off.

Assessment of the worker's abilities and the fit for the job also might be helpful as would be evaluation of his place within the work team. If the employee expresses a desire to be retained but seems to have no grasp of why there is concern, a confidential "360" evaluation could help give him feedback from several perspectives. It is not unusual to find concerns identified by supervisors and co-workers are not the same as those discovered in a professional assessment. This type of assessment must be introduced in a positive light, emphasizing that information will be used to rectify the situation not to punish the employee who is hostile already.

In some cases there is no suitable fix either through treatment or accommodation. Older workers who are having memory problems or find themselves unable to adapt might be urged to pursue disability status or consider retirement. Others when given the chance to modify their behaviors may fail to do so and, at that time, may need to be terminated. The more clearly you have defined ongoing problem areas that can be pointed out to the problematic worker, the better the outcome if he has to be let go.

While many problems can be fixed, no employer or co-workers should have to feel threatened. Effective assessment and suitable intervention can help save a valuable resource or at least give him a chance. Such an undertaking will deliver a message to the rest of the work force that hostile behaviors will not be tolerated but chances will be given to anyone who is willing to make the effort to work out issues so they can continue to be employed in a safe and productive environment.