

## State of Mind – September 2008

*Soon after we hired one specific individual, problems began to arise with coworkers, supervisors and our customers. This person was prone to rapid changes in mood and confused everyone in the office to the point that the general environment became one of distrust and hostility. In many cases, this employee would extol the virtues of someone but then turn around and vilify the same person. Several weeks ago, things came to a head and an admission to an inpatient mental health treatment program occurred after what appeared to be a suicide attempt. Within three days of entering in the hospital, this employee declared that all problems had resolved themselves and there was nothing to be concerned about. Now, this person wants to return to work and has declared that accommodations may have to be made because of the diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder as the basis of all difficulties. What does this mean, and what should we do?*

This type of situation is particularly important for employers to understand, as many people with personality problems are the ones who are more prone to initiating litigation for discrimination or hostile work environment. The mental health care providers may inadvertently create a situation that can lend itself to management problems.

The types of difficulties your employee has exhibited are better associated with a **Personality Disorder**, which is defined as a deeply engrained, enduring and maladaptive pattern of behavior that causes dysfunction in one or more areas of an individual's life. While all of us have certain predominant characteristics that describe us and the way in which we relate to the world, some people develop a very narrow band of adaptive behaviors that limit the degree to which they can cope with a variety of stressors in their lives. In some cases, they are able to live normally without much conflict or upheaval. However, many do leave a trail of dissatisfaction and disruption in both their personal and work lives that is attributable to their rigid way of dealing with day-to-day events.

In today's society, diagnostic labels such as Bipolar Disorder are inappropriately given to individuals with the types of behavior problems you have reported. Sadly, in many instances individuals with difficult personalities end up receiving some type of mental health diagnosis based upon criteria set forth in a book known as the *DSM-IV TR*. While in some cases the condition is legitimate, too often, there is a rush to judgment with the hope that giving such a label will justify prescription of medications that will control dysfunctional behaviors. In this case, rapid fluctuation of moods and self-injurious behaviors are likely to be associated with a classification called Borderline Personality Disorder. When such individuals feel threatened, they tend to act with rage-filled outbursts or violence directed at themselves or others. Under less severe circumstances, they will undermine the authority of others as they seek ways to assert control and gain approval or acceptance. Chaos generally reigns in their lives and very often it spreads to those around them. It is not that they are mentally ill or suffering from something that will be cured by medicine; instead, they need very specific interventions that deal with distorted ways of thinking and acting.

There are several other patterns that are associated with specific personality characteristics. In some cases an individual may appear suspicious, defensive and rigid. These employees will question the motives of others and resist change. Others may continually seek attention and behave in a dramatic and even seductive manner with unexpected attacks on others that could include physical harm. There are those who are so self absorbed that they blame all bad things on everyone but themselves. This latter group is generally unwilling to accept responsibility for negative outcomes and will react poorly to any form of criticism. A description of each of these is available in an article entitled, "Personality Disorders in Employment Litigation" (Lipian, 2001). [The specific reference is available if requested by e-mail to the author of this article.]

Because everyone has the potential to fall into a pattern of dysfunctional behavior, it is essential that employers learn to identify situations that could escalate into disruption—or even costly litigation. Clearly defined policies and procedures that are administered and enforced consistently are essential to dealing with all types of personalities. From there, understanding how you may be perceived and interpreted (or misinterpreted) differently by the individuals with whom you interact will allow you to vary your actions to better motivate others to perform at their highest levels. Finally, studying and probing into the ways in which others interpret what you have meant to say or do will help to minimize misunderstandings, while also demonstrating your willingness to be flexible. Hopefully, other will begin to model your modified behavior.

Finally, a word of caution is appropriate. You need to know that the types of personality issues alluded to in this article are not the ones addressed in popular instruments such as the MBTI or DiSC, which are commonly used in pre-hiring, training and team-building applications. Such assessments generally fall short of identifying traits associated with more disruptive factors and, therefore, should not be used to try to define problems when there is a question about an individual's fitness to perform essential job functions or work with others safely and harmoniously.

Moving forward with this employee may necessitate a formal analysis of this employee's capacity to perform job functions without deteriorating or upsetting the regular milieu in the workplace. This undertaking would include a determination of whether a mental disorder actually exists or if personality issues are the main problems. A **Return to Work** evaluation conducted by a qualified professional will provide this kind of information and give you an appraisal of the functional limitations of this worker. Recommendations about fitness to come back to work as well as any accommodations should be associated with objective data that protects you and the employee.