



GUEST COLUMN — The Usual Suspects

By Elaine Varelas, Managing Partner, Keystone Partners

Every office has them — those few individuals who all the other employees try to avoid. It may be the woman from accounting who bathes in perfume, or the guy in the mailroom who talks way too loud. When you see them walking down the hall, you dart the other way. We know these social faux pas can impact a person's career — the loud-talker may never get out of the mail room, and the woman from accounting may only get promoted if her supervisors have an inferior sense of smell. But have you ever thought about how these behaviors can undermine your organization?

Employees who exhibit destructive behaviors or make poor choices may be held back from reaching their full potential. These workplace gaffes can derail their careers, but they can also hurt your organization. The woman in accounting may have the talent to be a top-performing CFO, but she may never get the chance. The challenge for Human Resources Managers is recognizing when a behavior merits intervention, and then deciding what to do about it.

Of course there are software suites that make it easy for companies to track who's doing what with whom. And many are doing just that. In fact, according to a study by the American Management Association, 60 percent of employers monitor in — and outgoing messages, almost two-thirds track employee web usage, 20 percent tap into instant messaging (IM), and one-quarter of companies reported firing an employee for violating e-mail policies.

In addition to the loud talkers and perfume bathers, let's start by rounding up and taking a look at other usual suspects — the crew of perpetrators you can find almost everywhere:

The Gossip — This person always has a sympathetic ear when you screw up a big project or get into an argument with your spouse — and then tells the whole department about it. The other ear is also known to eavesdrop.

The Complainer — This employee is unhappy with everything — bosses, coworkers, the cafeteria food, even the weather — and isn't afraid to let everyone know.

TMI Guy (or Woman) — This guy gives way too much detail about his personal life. You don't just hear about the breathtaking scenery on his Caribbean honeymoon, but also what happened in the bedroom. Too Much Information!

Casual Friday Freak — These individuals take fashion tips from "The Apprentice." You may see a woman wearing her belly-baring top and low-rise jeans (to

showcase her navel ring, of course), or a man with grass-stained sweatpants and a baseball cap.

The Bully — This person intimidates everybody — even his or her boss. May also be described as aggressive and self-centered.

Now that you've corralled and fingerprinted (or at least identified) your suspects, what, if anything, do you do with them? What is HR's role in dealing with personality issues?

At some point in our careers, most of us have whined about a project at work, or made a poor fashion choice. It's the repeat offenders who need attention — employees who constantly gossip, bully, or complain until it affects their relationships with colleagues, or disrupts their department. The description of these "suspects" may seem silly, but their behaviors are important to identify, and can truly influence your organization's work environment. In fact, managers are much more forgiving of mistakes made in the day-to-day tasks of a job than they are of social offenses.

That's because they understand the impact these behaviors can have on the team. It may seem tricky to decipher between a false alarm and what has the potential to turn into a five-alarm blaze. However, chances are if the issue made it to your desk it is already starting to spark. Once it's there, it becomes a matter of how you handle it. In less serious situations, a manager may discreetly speak with the employee, while major offenses may warrant formal intervention from the HR department.

While *how* you deal with the issue is important, *when* you address it is just as significant. It's often tempting to let complaints pile up before you intervene. This is especially true when you're dealing with a top producer. But letting it go until it becomes much more of a problem is exactly what you want to avoid. Ordinarily, the best time to act is at the first complaint. If one person has the chutzpah to bring a personnel conflict to you, there are probably ten of his or her colleagues that feel the same way, but didn't speak up. Most of the time, these issues won't go away on their own, so you'll have to get involved eventually. It may seem like busywork to run around dealing with these "minor" conflicts, but you will save yourself time and suffering in the end.

This also sets a good example for managers in handling conflicts within their own departments. If a manager casually mentions an issue with an employee, that's a clue to you that a problem may be brewing. Learn to look for those clues, and give your managers the guidance, coaching, and back-up they need to deal with difficult personalities.

You may find that you can actually capitalize on some of these undesirable personality traits and help those employees find a better fit within the organization. The company gossip could apply those sleuthing skills to conduct research on the competition or new products. The bully's persistence and assertiveness may be ideal qualities for someone in sales.

Although personality typing is an oft-disputed topic, by identifying your usual suspects, you will be better able to anticipate conflicts, and may even be able to harness these skills to benefit your organization. And if you act early enough, you may be able to intervene before your employees develop bad raps. By addressing

conflicts as they arise, you are promoting a more productive and enjoyable workplace — for everyone.

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