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5 Common Mistakes Leaders Make When Addressing Bullying and Incivility



Addressing bullying and incivility is one of the biggest challenges facing healthcare leaders today. A plethora of recent studies validate that bad behavior leads to burnout and turnover. Yet, it's rare that an organization provides leaders with the skills and tools they need to address incidents of bullying and incivility.

When left to figure it out themselves, many leaders, without realizing, make things worse. They have good intentions but don't always make good decisions when addressing behavior.

Not only are we losing good employees to this problem but we're also losing good leaders.

The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way.

Over the last 10 years working with leaders to cultivate professional, healthy workforce cultures, we've identified 5 critical mistakes leaders make when dealing with disruptive behaviors.

1 Addressing the behavior only once

You have an employee who is so clinically excellent but who is toxic. The physicians love her; she gets tons of accolades from patients, yet you can't keep staff because she eats them for breakfast. You finally find the courage to sit down and have an honest conversation with her. You set clear expectations for behavior moving forward, document the conversation, and then celebrate. Whew!!! You did it!! And then scratch working with "her" on this behavior off your list.

Why you do it.

Confronting a strong, disruptive employee, especially one who is clinically competent, is super uncomfortable!! It takes moral courage to actually tell someone their behavior is unacceptable, especially because we don't know how they'll react. And because it's so uncomfortable, we never want to have that conversation again.

Why this is a mistake.

One uncomfortable conversation won't change someone's behavior – especially someone who's been behaving badly for decades.

What you should do.

After the uncomfortable conversation, schedule weekly touch point meetings with this employee to review progress. It may take some time but this employee will realize that you are serious and will either step up or you'll have the opportunity to step them out.

2 Addressing one person's bad behavior at a staff meeting

You have one employee who swipes in 15 - 20 minutes late every morning. Everyone else on the team arrives on time. During the staff meeting, instead of confronting the late employee individually, you confront the entire team discussing the importance of why everyone needs to come to work on time.

Why you do it.

It's easier on you, especially if you avoid confrontation.

Why this is a mistake.

You'll lose credibility with the rest of your employees. Why? Because everyone in that meeting who comes to work on time knows that you're talking about the individual but don't have the courage to tell them. It's a passive approach to addressing an issue.

What you should do.

If you're having an issue with just one or a small handful of employees, address the issue individually.

3 Ignoring bad behavior because the employee is excellent

You have an employee with whom you've been dealing with their disruptive behavior for years. He is a high performer and excellent at what he does yet has been known to sabotage any new employee he doesn't like, loves to pit people against each other, and when in charge, gives the easiest assignments to his "friends" while crushing his "enemies" with the worst assignments. You've not done anything about it in the past because when he's in charge, you know the unit will be functioning well; he works overtime when needed and has excellent skills. So, you justify his bad behavior when employees complain.

Why you do it.

It's easy to justify someone's bad behavior when they are so competent, especially if they are in an informal leader role, like charge, because they take some tasks off of your plate.

Why this is a mistake.

When we ignore someone's bad behavior just because they are excellent at their job, we put patients at risk and the good employees will leave you. Numerous studies prove this. Enough said.

What you should do.

Performance and behavior should hold equal weight. Set clear performance AND behavioral expectations with employees. And tell this employee that although clinically competent, his behavior is unacceptable. Oh, and take him out of the charge role. Never have someone in an informal leadership role if they are not a professional role model.

4 Waiting to begin documentation

You have an employee whom your other employees complain about. This employee is abrasive, overly critical, and has been known to berate co-workers in front of patients. You've ignored complaints because you know this employee is going through a rough time in her personal life AND...she's a high performer. So, you don't document any of the complaints and don't document the incidents of unprofessional behavior you've actually witnessed too. Until, one of your brand new nurses rushes into your office crying and quits because of this employee. Enough is enough! So now you decide to take action but you have no documentation of the previous gazillion incidents of disruptive behavior.

Why you do it.

It takes time to document so when you have an employee who behaves badly but you understand the reason, it's easy just to blow it off.

Why this is a mistake.

For many employees who end up on corrective action up to the point of termination, it's rarely one incident that results in a "slam dunk." The reality is, especially when it comes to behavior, often times managers have to build a case. You build a case by documenting every incident of disruptive behaviors that are in violation of your code of conduct, unit based professional behavioral agreements, etc. until you show a pattern of behaviors that undermines a culture of professionalism.

What you should do.

Document every incident of behaviors that you believe are in violation of a professional code of conduct in a timely manner - no matter how minor or "justified" the reason. As one of the leaders in our Healthy Workforce Academy does, "Document on your employees like you documented on your patients." Brilliant!

5 Not involving HR early

You have an employee who is toxic and finally make the decision to put her on corrective action. You don't involve your HR rep and put her on a performance improvement plan. Then three months later when you get another complaint, you decide to terminate her. Yet when you ask HR to approve the termination, you "hit a brick wall". Your HR rep tells you that you don't have good documentation, they've never heard that there was an issue with the employee and the employee's last 15 performance reviews showed "meets" or "exceeds" expectations. They deny your termination – too risky.

Why you do it.

As the leader, we often don't think we need to involve HR, especially for things we think we should be able to handle. And, let's be honest, leaders don't always have a good relationship with their HR rep. So, they tend not to seek advice or counsel from HR.

Why this is a mistake.

Especially for behavioral issues that are rarely clear-cut, not involving HR could make it difficult for you to actually hold an employee accountable for their behavior if it comes to termination.

What you should do.

Give HR a heads-up as soon as you've addressed someone's behavior a second time. Just a quick, "Hey. Wanted you to know about an employee...." Because if you decide to terminate this employee as some point, your HR rep will be more likely to support your decision.

Now, we don't think we'll ever get to a place where all employees get along. And, when you think about it that really shouldn't be the goal. The goal should be to cultivate a culture where employees communicate respectfully with each other to achieve a common goal.

Avoid these five mistakes and you'll be closer to cultivating a culture where employees stay and feel great about the work they do!

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