



### FACING UP TO THE COMPANY TROUBLEMAKER

**P**ROBABLY EVERYBODY AT SOME point in his or her career has been victimized by a troublemaker—an unscrupulous boss or co-worker who makes life miserable. Indeed, every company has its share of troublemakers, and dealing with them is a difficult and sensitive problem for top management.

Troublemakers must not be confused with dissenters. Dissenters are people who tend to disagree with the decisions or actions of those holding or controlling the majority view. They are the mavericks who, given the right kind of corporate culture, offer the fresh insights and unusual perspectives that foster innovation. Troublemakers are aggressive and destructive people who enhance their own position and power by harassing, intimidating and hurting other people.

Unfortunately, management often seems to support troublemakers by allowing their bad behavior to continue unchallenged. In part, that's because many troublemakers are intelligent, hardworking people who contribute to the organization despite their disruptive behavior. Besides that, most "normal" people are uncomfortable dealing with abnormal behavior and so avoid confrontation with troublemakers. By looking the other way, they

can somehow pretend that the problem doesn't exist—and, at the same time, ignore their own fear of acting out the internal conflicts and aggression that exist in all of us.

Troublemakers, who can be found at any level in the management hierarchy, are easily identified by several types of behavior. Some have a dire need to control everything and everyone in all situations. Others, who are motivated by a deep mistrust of people, demand blind loyalty and complete harmony. Still others must win

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every dispute and receive all the credit for any success.

Troublemakers often come out of the woodwork during a company reorganization. With their obsessive need to maintain control over their fiefdoms, the last thing they want is for management to come up with ideas for change. They will seem to go along with the project in meetings and the like, but then use every means at their disposal—such as intimidating and threatening lower-level managers and other subordinates—to sabotage it clandestinely.

Whatever their mode of behavior, troublemakers are insecure people who, locked in a life-and-death struggle with the world, cope with their inner conflicts and negative self-image by projecting them onto others. Their aggressive and hostile behavior toward co-workers is a way of retaliating against those people—mainly parents—who inflicted pain and suffering on them in the past. A person who was physically or psychologically abused in childhood does not feel good about himself because he was taught to see himself as bad. How else can a child explain the abuse? Thus, he has never acquired a sense of responsibility for his actions, since the shame of doing one more thing wrong would be too much to bear.

To be sure, not everyone who suffered in childhood becomes a troublemaker. Most people adjust to the world as they mature and thereby break the unconscious tendency to do to others what was done to them. But this requires a certain amount of self-awareness and a willingness to take personal responsibility for one's actions and their consequences.

If we understand these psychodynamics, it comes as no surprise that troublemakers are not likely to learn from reading self-awareness books, attending training seminars or observing other people's behavior. While they are often ready to prescribe remedies for other troublemakers around them, they are too disturbed to question their own behavior.

But management can and should

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with mediocrity when the excellent  
lies before us!"**

— Anonymous

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## TOP MANAGEMENT

take action against troublemakers. These people are, after all, usually well known within the company; no doubt, co-workers' accounts of their mean and hostile acts follow them from one position to another. And co-workers will be more willing to speak out against them if they know that top management really wants to address the problem—without repercussions against whistle-blowers. Some suggestions for managing troublemakers:

□ Regular sessions by small groups of managers to discuss professional and ethical behavior often instill a more conscious awareness of the many dysfunctional consequences of troublemaking behavior. And developing a corporate code of conduct out of such discussions helps to formalize appropriate as opposed to inappropriate behavior.

□ Make use of the company's performance-appraisal system to assess how well each manager practices the code of conduct. This can be done through the same rating system used to measure any other aspect of the manager's performance. Then action can be taken against troublemakers—such as transferring them to positions where they cannot hurt others.

□ Although troublemakers find it difficult to receive any kind of feedback, face-to-face counseling is the most direct way to curb their disruptive behavior. Given the psychological conflicts that drive troublemakers to act in dysfunctional ways, a psychologist may be needed to confront them. Most managers do not have the skills to deal with pathology.

It should be apparent that no program to deal with troublemakers can work without top management's commitment and support. But if everyone is made to understand that disruptive behavior simply will not be tolerated, the message will be received. ■

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