

Managing Troublemakers

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In every organization I have encountered, there are one or more troublemakers, people who are preoccupied with enhancing their own power and glory, often at the expense of others. Does every organization have to tolerate such behavior? Or can troublemakers be managed so all members can concentrate on high performance rather than worrying about defense tactics?

To acknowledge the dysfunctional behavior of troublemakers is to question many longstanding assumptions about human nature. For the most part, organizations use a highly rational model of behavior. The model assumes that individuals work for the greater good of the organization; include all the relevant criteria and information when making decisions; and implement all decisions exactly as intended.

More accurate assumptions about human nature reflect other qualities: Human beings are not entirely rational or objective and have inherent limitations in mental capacity, memory and objectivity; insecurity and feelings of negative self-worth can result in defensive reactions and dysfunctional coping styles; strong desires for power and control can block the ability to make any decision that would increase dependency on the organization; people resist change when their

security and position in life are threatened; and people do not universally have the ability to learn.

These five assumptions of human nature allow for the existence of troublemaking. Only when we naively assume that human beings are all rational, all knowing, honest, good and pure are we surprised and shocked at how people act. Even if many people fit the rational model, a few clearly do not. Rather than assume these others can be ignored because they are a minority, I assume they must be managed precisely because they can be so disruptive to the rest of the organization.

In an attempt to be more realistic about the limited distribution of rational behavior in our society, I will discuss the psychological dynamics of troublemakers, explore why organizational change efforts expose troublemakers and summarize a four-step process for managing these individuals.

Who are the troublemakers?

Troublemakers (destructive individuals) and objectors (well-intentioned deviants) should never be confused. According to Ewing, objectors are mentally healthy individuals who disagree with a decision or action by those holding or controlling the majority view. By definition, objectors express the minority view. They are also known as complainers, dissenters, whistle blowers, mavericks and nonconformists. Listening to objectors is important, since they have specialized knowledge of their piece of the whole problem. Overruling objectors might smooth the process of managing simple problems, but when problems are complex, a wide variety of expertise and information is needed for their solution.

Troublemakers, in contrast, are not well-intentioned individuals who simply disagree with company policy. They exhibit unhealthy or destructive behaviors, such as lying, cheating, stealing, harassing, intimidating and purposely hurting other people. These behaviors poison the organization's spirit and performance. Managing the critical problems imposed by the organization's environment requires all our energy; there is no room for unnecessary problems created by the organization's own members.

Troublemakers come in many varieties. In his book *Coping With Difficult People*, Bramson profiles some of these characters as Sherman tanks, snipers, exploders and bulldozers. In a *Fortune* article titled "The Toughest Bosses in America," Flax summarizes comments made by subordinates about their tough bosses: "Working for him is like a war. A lot of people get shot up; the survivors go on to the next battle. . . Comes across as being a Napoleon complex—he has to throw his weight around. . . Unwilling to entertain ideas that don't fit with his. . . Employees are scared to death of him. . . Wild temper tantrums and firing threats commonplace. . ."

Another example is from a *Business Week* article titled "Following a Tough Act At Commodore". Former president Jack Tramiel's management style is acknowledged as having had disruptive effects, despite his hard-driven success:

For all his business brilliance, however, Tramiel's dominant personality led to constant management turnover. The 55-year old survivor of a World War II German concentration camp "ran Commodore like a dictatorship," says Alan H. Friedman, a former finance director at Commodore who left last April after two years. According to Ralph D. Seligman, a director and an attorney based in Nassau, the Bahamas, where Commodore has its corporate headquarters, "all sorts of heads have rolled at Commodore," because of Tramiel's nature.

Each type is an insecure and troubled person who copes with inner conflicts and negative self-image by projecting them onto other people. Some troublemakers are driven by a dire need to control everything.

Their need for power and authority is insatiable. For others, an overwhelming mistrust of others affects everything they do. Some troublemakers struggle to win at everything to overcome their negative self-images. Still others exhibit aggression or hostility toward co-workers as a form

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of revenge on people who inflicted pain in the past. Connections between how one was treated in the past and how one copes with the world today are evident in all troublemakers.

Not everyone who suffered in childhood becomes a troublemaker. Most people develop a degree of ego strength and willingness to take responsibility for one's life and its consequences.

Aggressive troublemakers are found in management positions throughout the hierarchy. As long as their intense drive to succeed does not result in more negative than positive outcomes, they do succeed. Many troublemakers are employees and managers who are intelligent, able and willing to work 20 hours a day if necessary.

Not to be confused with well-functioning high achievers, the troublemakers who succeed generally extract a price from those around them, including family and friends.

Why troublemakers fight change

I used to believe that a management skills workshop could reach troublemakers and that they would change their ways as a result, but this rarely happens. More often than not, these individuals attest to the value of the material for other managers who desperately need to change. Too troubled to look inside, see what is there and change it, the troublemakers do not recognize their own need to question their behavior and learn new management skills.

Any effort at organizational change and improvement generally brings troublemakers to the forefront. Apparently, most organization members take disruptive individuals as a given, the price of being part of any organization or society. The consultants or internal practitioners who initiate and conduct change efforts, however, should not take barriers to success as a given. In fact, only by questioning previous policies and behaviors can participants identify and overcome barriers to success.

Change efforts require members to examine their behavior and assumptions. A troublemaker may interpret a change program as an act of war, as an invasion of territory or as an ego threat. Resisting such programs, a troublemaker may try to undermine, if not sabotage, the whole change program. If a troublemaker is the top executive of the organization, the improvement effort is not likely to be suc-

If the change program is successful, troublemakers may escape the consultants, but they will not escape the managers and members of the organization.

cessful. In such cases, the effort is probably initiated for ulterior motives, for political and self-serving reasons.

The organization's troublemakers first come to the attention of the consultants or internal facilitators during the diagnostic stage, when organization members are interviewed. Certain names are mentioned again and again; stories of hostile acts that hurt other people or the organization are told. While stories often are exaggerated, they should be taken seriously when told by many persons and if they are highly alarming.

Once the program is under way, troublemakers neither are sensitive to feedback nor aware of how their behavior affects those around them. This is shown by expressing negative comments not germane to the topic of conversation, showing anger and hostility in verbal and nonverbal ways, and discouraging others from taking the discussions seriously. Those seeking assistance in applying new knowledge on the job may be ridiculed or threatened with negative performance reviews by their own managers.

But why does such behavior persist? Essentially, people look the other way and hope the problem, like an alcoholic co-worker, is not really there. Cultural norms suppress difficult problems as well: see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil.

Managing troublemakers

The objective of managing troublemakers is not to provide therapy, but to help them get their disruptive behavior under control.

Listing the names of troublemakers is the first step. Note the names of troublemakers mentioned repeatedly during diagnostic interviews and observed during workshop sessions. Distinguish between troublemakers and cases when two people simply do not get along. Trouble restricted to the two individuals and can be handled with third-party consultation.

Developing the list is not as easy as it seems. Those victimized by troublemakers' threats often hold back information about injustices for fear of losing their jobs. The HRD professional leading the change effort should propose to top executives that a thorough investigation be

conducted if any surprise termination, unusual switch in job assignments or extremely negative performance appraisal occurs. Communicating the policy and reasons for it to managers brings the topic into the open and prevents people from being hurt by their efforts and willingness to confront difficult problems.

If top managers are surprised that such activity exists in their organization, the program leaders or consultants should explain that monitoring unusual activities is a way of protecting all organization members. Top management might have turned the other way as troublemakers exerted their influence, but the cost of ignoring disruptive employees is too high.

In the second step, schedule each troublemaker for a separate feedback session with a consultant who explains the purpose of the meeting. Protecting the confidentiality of the source, the consultant shares the reported incidents and impressions, acknowledging that they might be inaccurate.

Often, the person is shocked at being identified as a troublemaker and disturbed by the comments. In the best case, he or she responds positively, suggesting how the incidents developed and how the perceptions were formed. The individual outlines how to correct the perceptions, as well as the behavior. At this point, the person recognizes the problem and wants to solve it.

In most cases, the initial response is defensive and hostile and becomes a replay of the stories and incidents reported earlier. The consultant determines whether or not to point out that the person's response seems to confirm the behavior described. When the reaction is extreme, the individual is not likely to hear the message. The consultant concludes by encouraging the individual to think about the discussion and indicating that there will be follow-up meetings.

Some will act as if their behavior has changed, hoping the consultants will leave and that everything will go back to "normal." The rest of the membership hopes that the consultants will remain so the troublemakers will not go back to their old behavior. If the change program is successful, disruptive individuals may escape

the consultants but they will not escape all the other managers and members of the organization.

Without top management support and the power of the hierarchy, the troublemakers will not attend feedback sessions and will ignore related discussions, and other members will not confront troublemakers for fear of reprisals. However, a clear message from top management that disruptive behavior will not be tolerated is understood by all organization members, including the troublemakers.

Follow-up sessions are next.

As consultants observe behavior during the program or as new information is brought forth, decisions are made about whether to schedule additional feedback sessions. For those who responded positively and changed their behavior immediately, further sessions are unnecessary. For those who responded defensively during the first session, the same disruptive behavior usually continues. Because they have difficulty hearing and responding to feedback, follow-up sessions are required.

Follow-up sessions often are a repeat of the initial discussion. The troublemaker insists he changed behavior and claims he

is a victim of circumstance. He does not understand how his motives and behaviors can be so misconstrued and considers that other members are simply jealous of his energy, intelligence and accomplishments. At this point, troublesome employees define and create a vision of reality that matches the image they have of themselves. If the facts do not fit their needs, they change the facts. A new reality explains the value and worth of their net contributions. An example is the troublemaker's insistence that he likes and cares for the same people he has hurt.

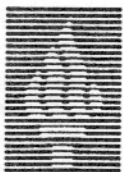
For troublemakers who did not respond positively to the first feedback session, four to six sessions over a period of several months may be necessary. One result of a successful change program is that organization members become more assertive about confronting disruptive behavior. If members fear what might happen, they are more likely to discuss it with another manager rather than with the consultants. In the past, they might not have discussed it with anyone. The members gain more and more control over their organization by putting a check on the troublemakers themselves.

Accepting all sides of human nature allows us to recognize and control trouble-

makers who play upon the fears, doubts and anxieties of group members. When we assume that everyone is rational, we allow those who are not to use the organization as their own social battlefield. Organizational success requires managing human nature as it is, not as we wish it to be.

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