

GROWERTALKS

Features

12/1/2018

When Someone Seems a Little “Off”

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I'm typically happy and energetic, and if I'm not, my friends or family will ask if I'm ill or if something has occurred. Depending on the circumstance, the answer may be yes or no. When an employee acts outside of their typical behavior, we may think that something is off, but may not know how to ask the question to understand what's going on.

As an HR professional, I've had frequent conversations with leaders and managers wondering what to do if they suspect an employee is “acting funny.” Sound familiar?

An employee is nodding off at their desk—perhaps they're moonlighting and have had no sleep. What should you say?

An employee's breath smells “funny” and you wonder if they've been drinking or smoking before, during or after work. Now their performance is starting to slip—is something going on?

An employee has started to become lax with their appearance and hygiene and other employees are complaining. This awkward situation is starting to “stink.” What can you do?

A previously calm-and-collected employee is now acting in an emotional and defensive manner when questioned about their work. Should you keep an eye on this or confront the employee?

Chances are you've experienced behavior that you consider “odd” or “funny” and you or your managers have approached the situation and may have received less-than-favorable results. A manager may make a casual comment and say, “You're not yourself—what's going on? Have you been drinking? You look sloppy—did you roll out of bed and come to work?”

When confronted in this manner, the employee may have been defensive, the manager may have gotten frustrated or it appeared the conversation went well, but nothing changed. Once said, these casual comments cannot be taken back. These are delicate conversations that act as magnets with your employees. When you handle these conversations ineffectively, the employee may pull away. When you handle these conversations with grace and professionalism, the employee will respect and trust you, and have a longer-term commitment to the organization.

Be clear of what's expected

How can you approach these situations with a positive outcome for the employee and the organization? Managing performance and providing feedback consists of clear expectations and communication of observed behaviors.

Clear expectations are identified on an organizational level in your vision, values, company handbook (you have one,

right?) and processes. When the company clearly shares their point of view and exemplifies how employees should interact or communicate with each other, you do not accept less than the desired behavior. When the company details appearance standards (dress code and hygiene), you can address the behavior that's not in adherence.

When the company details the substance abuse policy, you can speak to the employee regarding their behavior that's not reflecting these standards. Ensure that your company handbook and policies aren't open to interpretation. Everyone's definition of "business casual attire" isn't the same; some will arrive in khakis and others in yoga pants.

Once you've identified the expectations on an organizational level, ensure you've clearly communicated the responsibilities and outcomes of the role that the employee is going to perform. Metrics that detail timeframes or number targets provide clarity and boundaries for your employees and should be included in job descriptions. To further highlight the importance of these results, the descriptions with desired outcomes can be shared in interviews, onboarding, training and ongoing feedback.

What should you do?

Let's say you have an employee who works in the warehouse and is supposed to receive 50 boxes of plants per day. This duty may include receiving, inspecting and staging incoming shipments. The employee has started "acting funny" and now he's only able to receive, inspect and stage 30 shipments per day. You conduct your due diligence and determine that nothing has changed relative to the operation. You've suspected the employee has another issue that may include some form of substance abuse, but haven't known how to approach him.

Once you've outlined expectations that are clear and detailed, you can approach the employee and discuss the behavior you're witnessing in an objective and professional manner. You now have a method to gauge performance and discuss the change in results. This approach to feedback may feel very direct and cold, but it's respectful and allows you to identify the reasons behind the performance change. You're focusing on the behavior, not the person or personality.

During the feedback session, you can ask the employee, "Is anything standing in the way of you doing your job?" If the employee says no, then you'll hold him accountable to the results and expectations previously communicated. The proof of their commitment lies in their results.

The employee may say yes and may share personal information. When an employee shares a personal situation that's causing a change in behavior, ask for permission before you offer guidance. Suppose the employee states, "I'm going through a divorce and not handling it very well. I'm getting support from my friends and we're going out at night. We drink and talk. I didn't know it was getting in the way of my job." In this case, you would communicate compassion for the situation and reinforce that the employee is expected to perform their job and achieve results. Ask the employee if they would like additional support. Support may include participation in an employee assistance program (EAP) or additional counseling if that's available through your organization or benefit company.

These situations are always difficult, as you want what's best for the employee. They may or may not choose to accept support—remember, it's their choice. Regardless, you hold them accountable to perform their job.

In the example pertaining to poor hygiene or erratic emotional behavior, the employee may communicate that they're seeking medical attention for these issues. If this is the case, partner with human resources to appropriately respond to these delicate situations. If an employee is seeking medical care, the doctor may identify how the condition is affecting their ability to perform their job. This will provide a framework for the organization to reset expectations and will inform regarding next steps, i.e., FMLA, job reassignment, etc.

You may be thinking this information is logical and easy—you're correct, but how often in the heat of the moment do we lose our ability to think or act logically? Remember, other people on your team are providing feedback regarding

their observations in the workplace. Are they speaking to specific outcomes and behaviors, or are they making general comments that are spontaneous and could erode the relationship or employee engagement? Train and coach your managers how to set expectations and provide feedback.

Confronting these types of situations can be awkward. You may communicate something that the employee hasn't heard previously and this could be embarrassing for the employee. If the employee is aware of the situation, they may have never disclosed this information to anyone outside of their family or friends. You may consider writing notes or scripts to prepare for the conversation. This allows you to pick your words and ensure you communicate in a compassionate, respectful and professional manner.

Remember, "acting funny" may be serious business! **GT**

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