



Caswell **CORPORATE COACHING** Company

Making companies better places to work - worldwide

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Bill Caswell is an experienced coach of CEOs and senior executives around the globe. The author of 14 books, Bill has penned the 12-book series *The Respect Revolution* written, by a CEO for CEOs, as a guide to getting your company to *Excellence*.

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Walking on Eggshells?

The "special-care" employee

How often do we run into the situation in an office where one individual gets special treatment? Everyone walks lightly around the person, or as is often stated, we find ourselves walking on eggshells. The old adage applies: the family dances around the most dysfunctional member.

First, such a situation is intolerable; however, a quick word from a well-meaning boss will not suddenly put it all back in order. In fact, it might cause untold grief as, for example, the 'special' person leaves the job site in a huff and now critical assembly becomes unsafe because there are no longer enough workers; a whole afternoon of production might be lost.

So, the first rule is not to attempt to fix it in an instant. The second rule is that you need to work out a long-term strategy (a) to alleviate the situation regarding this particular individual and (b) to prevent any other employees from joining that questionably 'special' stratus in the future.

Let's examine three real situations, which we will call Tom, Dick and Harry.

Tom

Tom is the boss's son who inherited a leadership position in the firm as general manager. That is because, his father the boss, wanted to reduce his own load and to focus on clients – a task the father really enjoyed. Although in the operational leadership position, Tom was negative and always with a 'sky-is-falling-in' attitude, especially: "if you workers don't pick up the slack". He cursed at employees and was publicly venomous, towards his father the owner – as if it was the father's past stewardship "that got us all into this trouble". The dilemma: it was very hard for the father to discipline his own son – let alone fire him.

Dick

Dick was the son of a friend of the boss, put onto a regular production-line position. He and the boss's daughter fell madly in love, despite a company-wide (and family-wide) policy of not mixing romance with workers. Dick was immature, uncommunicative and would walk off the line in a pout if anyone tried to correct his childish behavior. Staff said they had no idea how to communicate with him. The boss's daughter was frequently in tears if some disciplinary action was handed out. Dick would even choose the production line he wanted to work on, stating his own preference rather than the company needs. The dilemma: Every action taken by the boss to correct Dick meant a tearful conflict later that day with his daughter.

Harry

Harry was a bit long in the tooth, an able and experienced engineer engaged in providing detailing of shop and construction drawings but he was moody and could often flare up at the slightest provocation. Harry carried a chip on his shoulder which he disguised by an ongoing sense of humour that seemed appealing at first but later, most co-workers viewed it as an irritating mask for Harry's sensitivities. One example dilemma was: When the boss asked the co-worker one night long after usual working hours to move some material from Harry's desk, the co-worker protested fearing he would upset Harry. Was the

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boss to discipline the co-worker for not obeying a simple instruction, when the real problem lay with Harry?

The Underlying Problems

- a. In each case, the rules of engagement either were not provided at the outset or were not consistently applied.
- b. In each case the boss was caught unaware by inappropriate behavior that the boss assumed was not to be expected from an adult – and especially from his carefully chosen work staff.
- c. Thirdly, there was no clear consequence for inappropriate behavior.
- d. Last, but not least, the boss was led into a situation in which 'his hands were tied' if he acted as would otherwise have seemed appropriate to the situation.

These points may sound like bad management, but it is an easy dilemma to get into. You do not have rules about spitting on the floor in your office because you think such behavior would never happen; business owners do not expect to run into bizarre behaviors such as described above.

Solutions

- a. The rules of engagement need to be stated that all employees will participate in regular company meetings and sessions for a continuous exchange of information. Such meetings would be conducted in a 'safe environment' which should include a referee at each meeting. This could become standard company procedure (as CCCC insists on with its clients). At least at the meeting, the problem employee would be kept in line because of (i) peer pressure and (ii) the presence of the referee.
- b. Although the inappropriate behavior would always be neutralized in a safe environment, inappropriate behavior outside of the safe environment would remain a concern; it must become a topic for discussion at a peer meeting quickly called, and conducted within the rules of a safe environment.
- c. Consequence of misbehavior need to be specified: sulking, walking off the job, fighting, swearing etc. will result in the employee being asked to leave the work premises immediately and return only when the employee can desist from such behavior. Further discipline might apply. But, whatever action is taken, it must be legal; it must have been specified in advance and it must not be punitive but rather, corrective.
- d. The tricky problem to avoid, is your becoming trapped by the exclusive position of the dysfunctional employee. The stronger the emotional tie, the more difficult the situation. Once, my VP of finance wanted to hire my own sister because the VP valued her talent. After a certain amount of protesting by me, I finally relented. I told the VP that I was to never be involved in dealing with any misdemeanor with that employee (my sister); the VP must reach to another executive for assistance. I told my sister, I never wanted to hear any complaint about her boss or the job or the company; she was to voice these only to another VP in the company. Fortunately, this worked out well.
- e. In the case of difficult employees where there are not emotional ties, the desired solution is to attempt to nurture a replacement for that person's role so you are not left in a lurch if a drastic departure should occur.
- f. Hire a career coach to guide the problem employee to another job – a job situation that suits the person's disposition better. This \$5,000 cost gives a manifold return on your investment as well as leading to the betterment of the individual's well-being – which, itself is priceless and speaks well of your concern for your employees.

Good luck,

Bill Caswell