



Brisbane Office: Level 18 Riverside Centre, 123 Eagle St, Brisbane QLD

Ballina Office: Unit 3 99 Tamar Street, Ballina NSW 2478

Post. PO Box 72 Lennox Head NSW 2478

Phone. 0428 874186

Fax. (02) 66 874207

Email. info@savvyhr.com.au

Web. www.savvyhr.com.au

ACN 111 717 590

savvy employer update

More trouble than they're worth? Coaching the 'top dog'.

Pettiness, nastiness and demeaning behaviours often pervade our working day and can ultimately undermine our job satisfaction. Some workplaces seem to foster arrogant jerks and either ignore, forgive or even encourage nastiness. Quite often the productive, but abusive employee is tolerated. Bullies, jerks or egomaniacs? Whatever we call them, many appear clueless about their behaviour. Even worse, some of them are proud of it. Other jerks seem to be troubled and embarrassed by their behaviour, but can't seem to contain or control their meanness or outbursts. All are similar, however in that they infuriate, demean, and damage their peers, superiors, reports, and at times, clients and customers too.

The most common behavioural style of these people is an obsession with winning – even if it is trivial, not worth their time or even to their disadvantage, they often try to win anyway. Quite often these people are male and highly successful - they are smart and they believe that their insights are unique so put complete faith in their instincts. They view their clients as potential conquests; approach negotiations in terms of win/lose and focus on the immediate transaction rather than the long term relationship.

Their other behavioural style is one of 'power' – they come off as being arrogant and inflexible and want to control their customer's dependence on them for their expertise, product or information. While these behaviours may see them become successful, their relationships with their clients are usually short term with little likelihood of getting repeat business or others recommending them to other potential clients.

They dictate rather than guide, and deal with their staff in an aggressive and forceful way and they think that motivation and performance improvement involves pointing out mistakes, being critical and dismissing ideas due to minor flaws. They are intimidating, which makes learning from them difficult. They are judgemental of colleagues who can't control emotions, yet they openly vent their frustration or anger and then dismiss these outbursts, arguing that the same rules don't apply to the 'boss' or 'top dog'. The downside to this behaviour is that they are often stressed and have very poor personal relationships; quite often their success is short-lived.

Businesses become dysfunctional when people avoid dealing with this difficult person, work around him or simply pay him lip service.

So what can be done to assist these people to improve their behavioural style and build a more positive workplace culture? Many small businesses turn to 'business coaches' for advice, but this is a primitive field with many coaches being 'accredited' by commercial providers, without any educational psychology underpinnings. Many 'coaches' will say they can address any problem you have when they really have no business trying to fix problems they know little about. Most are the 'more sizzle – than steak' variety espousing platitudes such as "work on your business - not in it" and "if ya fail to plan - ya plan to fail".

These people require skilled coaches because the coaching process can make them feel unproductive and out of control. They haven't achieved their success through self-reflection and they often fail to see that it is their own communication style creating difficulties, rather than someone else's shortcomings. They are stubborn and resist feedback, its difficult for them to ask for help.

Good coaching enhances the person's effectiveness by preserving their strengths and their focus on results while correcting weaknesses. 360 degree feedback is essential as it provides credible, consistent data that helps the person step outside their style to see themselves as others do. It provides a wake-up call by presenting undeniable evidence that his current behaviour doesn't work nearly as well as he thinks it does. Including superiors and co-workers is essential as usually they have managed around the behaviour which in turn has perpetuated it. The key to lasting change requires the entire business to alter how they behave, rather than simply treating an individual problem.

Our clients usually ask how long our coaching process takes and what kinds of interim results can they expect. The answer varies according to the individual's commitment to change, the organisation and how involved they are in the process. For some, a 360-degree assessment followed by one or two coaching sessions is sufficient for noticeable change. For others, who are less self-aware, it may require three months of coaching sessions before changes in behaviour are evident.

For further information contact:

Craig McFadden Managing Director
Savvy Human Resources Associates Pty Ltd
Brisbane QLD & Ballina NSW
Level 18 Riverside Centre Eagle St Brisbane 4000
3/99 Tamar St Ballina 2478
mobile. 0428 874186 fax. +61 (02) 66 874207
email. craig.mcfadden@savvyhr.com.au w. www.savvyhr.com.au

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