

## Coaching the Highly Valued Problem Employee

I was talking one day with a colleague, Larry, about the challenge of coaching the difficult, but too valuable to fire, employee.

“These are tough cases,” Larry said. “It’s easy to focus on the difficulties the person is causing and forget that the goal is to help the person see how their behavior is causing problems and how to do better.”

As we talked about the problem, it became clear that the focus of coaching a highly valued employee has to be on helping that person *accept responsibility* for his or her part in the problem. Let’s return to my conversation with Larry about how he did this.

“For example,” Larry said, “A few months ago, a client called me about a problem employee named Mike. Mike is bright, creative and a great problem solver, but he’s also arrogant and has a dismissive attitude when dealing with his coworkers.

The client told Larry, “I’ve had it with Mike. He’s one of our most valuable people but he gets on everyone’s nerves to the point that I have two people ready to quit. I’ve tried everything but nothing seems to help.”

Larry met with Mike. After some get-acquainted talk with Mike, Larry said, “Mike, I have a problem I’ve been asked to deal with and I’m hoping you can help me. There have been some misunderstandings on your team that have had a negative affect on productivity and teamwork. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“I think so,” Mike said, “Some of the sissies I work with just don’t seem to be able to take a little constructive criticism.”

Larry said, “Your boss tells me that you are above-average smart and highly analytical, a valuable member of the team.”

Mike said, “Well, I am good at spotting problems, at seeing weak spots in a suggested solution to a problem -- that sort of thing – and I’m usually able to do that before others do. And I believe in straight talk, no beating around the bush.”

Larry asked, “Does that ever cause problems?”

“Not for me,” Mike said, “but it does for others if they can’t keep up with me.”

Larry said, “Mike, it’s a good thing to be really smart, but there are times when it is also is a liability that can work against you.”

Mike laughed, “Come on, how can being really smart be a liability?”

Larry said, “There’s an old saying, ‘Nobody likes the smartest kid in the class.’ The reason is that when a kid bungles the answer to a question and the smartest kid in the class immediately shouts out the answer, he sounds like a know-it-all who cares only about looking good at the expense of others.”

Larry went on, “Do you see how it could sound like an attack when you immediately jump in to point out why a person’s idea doesn’t work?”

Mike paused for a moment and then responded, “Yeah, I guess I do. I hadn’t looked at it like that before.”

Larry asked, “What do you think you could do to avoid being misunderstood in that way?”

Mike thought about it for a moment and then said, “I guess I need to get better at thinking about how it will sound to others if I say what’s on the tip of my tongue. Before, I just focused on what I wanted to say and didn’t think about how it might sound to others.”

Larry responded, “That’s an important insight. I want you to write it down – just the way you understand it – and then let’s talk again tomorrow about how you can train yourself to be aware of it. Then let’s get back together in two weeks to see how things are going. OK?”

Changing deeply ingrained habits is difficult, and for problems like Mike’s, it will probably take several coaching sessions for him to get real traction in making positive change, but the conversation has been a major step forward in that the problem is now out into the open.

Bad behavior habits often come from good intentions, but having good reasons for a bad habit doesn't excuse the damage they can cause. Coaching that helps the person focus on the mismatch between their good intentions and the negative outcomes of their behavior is more likely to be successful in helping the valued employee change his or her problem behavior.