



Winning at Hiring, Training and Retaining
Landscape Employees

A Contractor's Guide to Managing Problem Employees

AD&S

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Rescuing Your Company from Bad Players

While many factors contribute to labor inefficiency, poor performers can really drag your company down. They disrupt productivity, make excuses, drag down morale, do sub-standard work, disobey rules, and hurt relationships with long-term customers.

As a leader, it's up to you to resolve these challenges and turn chaos into order.

In some cases, employees become problems because they feel they can get away with it. Weak management and bad business practices can create a frustrated, disengaged workforce.

In this booklet, we'll share practical insights and techniques for dealing with problem workers and the workplace situations they create.

In a tight labor market, the option of "firing the bad ones and hiring new ones" isn't a viable option.

Instead, management needs to take a stronger role in creating a work environment where even marginal players can give their best. For professional contractors this means:

- 1) Avoiding common situations that cause bad behavior to happen
- 2) Changing your expectations of team members; remembering they need more guidance than you may expect
- 3) Having a consistent process for corrective action
- 4) Creating a positive workplace environment that supports employee growth

A more cohesive and productive team can help complete projects faster, reduce costs, win more bids, and increase profits.

Read on to learn tips that can help you this season.

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How Leaders Can Create Employee Problems

It's hard to be a leader. There are so many things to focus on. Sometimes when you're distracted or overworked, you can set up a situation where employee problems can spring up or grow. Here are some things to avoid:

Inconsistent Rules and Discipline: When You Give a Little, They Take a Little More

Do you let employees take advantage of your good nature? Allowing it to slide when the employee repeatedly shows up late. Letting someone get paid for time when they actually left early. Overlooking unproductive stops and phone calls in the work day. Being flexible is okay, except when it creates a pattern. When you clamp down or say "no", the employee sees you as a big jerk. Then you ease up to make them happy again. Instead, you need to create reasonable rules from the start. Explain why their reasonable. Enforce them consistently and repeatedly.

No Commitment to Training

Hoping employees will improve through learning on the job isn't a recipe for success. You need to offer specific training that will help develop all of their skills. Not training is settling for below-average results. Training requires planning and an investment of your time. It should happen all season long, not just during the winter months. Training should focus not just on technical knowledge but also in time management, cooperating with others, safety, customer communication, company goals and more.

Not Showing Appreciation

Leaders that get buried in "busyness" can forget to show appreciation for employees' efforts and accomplishments. Constantly driving, nit-picking and complaining can leave even the most dedicated team members feeling burnt out and bitter. Similarly, bosses who hoard information and don't share a vision for company goals find their best players get disconnected.

Putting Up with Bad Attitudes

You know the passive-aggressive type who talks behind your back and complains about everything? Nobody wants to work with someone who is perpetually negative, cynical and second-guessing while never offering solutions. Managers make excuses that they're too busy to get rid of these poison people. When they stay, the problem persists. Waiting to address the situation only makes the problem worse, and demoralizes the rest of your team as it festers.



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Ignoring Theft, Cheating and Side Deals

Many contractors can tell horror stories about employees who took supplier rewards or kickbacks, used company and equipment to do side jobs or who purchased materials for personal use on the company dime. Could this happen to you? Are you sure it's not going on right now? Have a plan to react quickly and professionally.

Modeling the Wrong Behaviors

When it comes down to it, your behavior will be the model for how employees act, how they treat each other and how they work as a team. If they see you communicating poorly, being a bully or having a negative or exhausted attitude, they'll start to model the same behaviors. If you're not committed to the right things, you can't expect your employees to be.

Loss of Credibility as a Manager

By tolerating poor performers and employees that have run out of momentum, you're hurting your credibility as a leader. Other team members are forced to endure them, cover for them or work around them. The bottom line is lower team morale and declining respect for management. Cutting dead weight often makes you a hero.

Not Everyone Fits Everywhere

Often the best thing you can do for a poor performer is to give them the opportunity to find a better opportunity somewhere else. When it's a bad fit, it's equally bad for the employee, because neither side can make progress.

How to Minimize Your Frustration with Problem Workers

1) **Set results-based workplans.** Be clear on the specific goals to achieve each day (what things, how much, by when). This way you have made the expectations clear, and have a basis for a coaching conversation when things don't happen as planned. When you don't set clear goals, employees can get away with "looking busy" and avoid delivering the results you need. When asked, over half of landscape employees don't know what's expected, or what results their boss wants them to accomplish today. You don't want that in your organization!

If the answer to "How much will you accomplish today?" is "as much as I can", you need to set a better plan at the start of each workday. It will help your team identify obstacles early, so they can be eliminated (and avoided as potential excuses!).

2) **Don't expect workers to think like you.** Your team members have their own challenges: living paycheck-to-paycheck, limited education, focusing on the short term, making personal mistakes. Managers get frustrated when their people miss the obvious or don't take initiative. Lower your expectations. Most want to grind through the tasks, not anticipate problems or enhance productivity. Adapt how and what you communicate more to their mindset.

3) **Guide, don't tell.** A good way to do this is to ask how the task(s) would be done. Where would they start? What roadblocks might come up? Coach with phrases like "have you considered this?" or "is there a more efficient way?" Get employees to step through things in their mind. Confirm whether silence means understanding, lack of understanding, or simply a fear of asking questions.

4) **Collaborate with criticism-sensitive team members.** Some employees are sensitive to criticism and will interpret even simple coaching as a rebuke. They've been supported by parents, teachers and others. The requirements of the workplace are a harsher reality. With these workers, you cannot stop coaching. Frame your efforts as a "collaboration". Get them to talk about how things will be done, and use questions to frame their thinking.

5) **Don't be tempted to let things slide.** It takes energy to tackle things head-on, but you must. Problems do not get better on their own. The sooner you dig in, the better your chance of coaching the employee into good habits and behaviors. "Letting it slide" develops bad habits that are unrecoverable.

6) **Go with your gut.** If your gut is telling you there's a problem, there probably is. Do what needs to be done and do it now.



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How to Take Corrective Action with a Problem Worker

- 1) **Stop ignoring the problem.** Problem employees don't fix themselves. They're a problem because they don't know what's expected and what the repercussions are for not addressing their behavior. You've got to take action.
- 2) **Avoid addressing one person's behavior with the whole team.** Do NOT give a speech to your whole crew in hopes that it will cause one person to improve. It just causes confusion, anxiety and ill-will with your good performers. Your feedback needs to be focused on the individual with the issue. Do not try to make an example out of the person.
- 3) **Have a direct, but supportive conversation.** Avoid judgmental words like "I am disappointed.". When you're meeting with the individual aim for a relaxed, free-flowing discussion. Notice and respond appropriately to your employee's reactions and body language. Demonstrate that you care what he thinks but that you also must meet the goals of the organization. If things get heated, stop and set a time to meet again.
- 4) **Don't assume a worker knows they've done something wrong.** Have a seek-to-understand conversation. Have a conversion: find out if they're aware of their behavior and its impact on the team. As mentioned earlier, if you've allowed employees to "test the limits", they're often lost on what's acceptable and what isn't. Be clearer on setting and enforcing the rules early.
- 5) **Develop a shared understanding.** Ask the employee to repeat back to you in his words what he needs to do to improve his behavior. Ask what resources or support he needs to improve. Establish how you're going to check in and verify that change has happened.
- 6) **Document your corrective actions.** Keep a record for two reasons: First, you'll have it for backup if you need to terminate the employee for cause. Second, when the employee knows you're tracking and recording infractions, they see it's just harder to get away with the wrong things.



Helpful Resources in Creating a Better Workplace

- 1) **Develop and provide an employee handbook.** It should include:
 - Code of conduct (including language, teamwork, dress code, etc.)
 - Company values / goals
 - Attendance policy
 - Safety policy
 - Drug policy
 - Social media / cell phone use policy
 - Non-discrimination policy
 - Employment and termination policy
 - Acknowledgement page (that employee signs and returns)
- 2) **Hold regular performance reviews.** Performance reviews demonstrate that you're committed to your people and their growth as valued members of your team. *Watch for our helpful guidebook for employee performance reviews.*
- 3) **Use a workplace styles tool like DISC.** The DISC assessment helps teams understand and value others workplace styles. DISC training for your team can lead to better self-awareness, fewer conflicts and greater productivity.



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Hire the Best. Train the Best. Motivate the Best.

Watch for additional resources to help you grow
your employee success in the months ahead.

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