



# Strategies for Dealing with Difficult Employees

Human resources professional Corina Sibley writes from experience about common difficult personality types and how to handle them in the workplace. Her recommendations will help ensure you have a healthy work environment.

We've all encountered them at one time or other. The moody hygienist who makes everyone around her (or him) walk on eggshells, or the clinic co-ordinator who can never seem to get to work on time. During my years of working with several dentists, it's clear that dental practices and clinics have their share of difficult employees. Here are a few of the more difficult employee types and problems, along with strategies on how to deal effectively with them.



schedule, and is negatively affecting her co-workers, who often have to cover for her.

**Miss Perpetually Late:** Andrea is a talented hygienist and the patients love her, specifically requesting her for their dental appointments. However, she typically arrives to work between 10 and 20 minutes late. This is having a huge impact on the clinic's ability to keep to their patient

## Suggestion:

- Have a discussion with Miss Late and review her attendance over the past month or more via a calendar, pointing out which days she was late and by how much on each occasion. Let her know how her pattern of lateness is affecting the clinic.
- Ask her if there is something preventing her from getting to work on time. If so, offer to help remove those barriers, or brainstorm to come up with suggestions she can implement.
- Let her know you will be putting her on a 30-day performance improvement plan (PIP), with the goal of consistently starting work on time.
- Let her know that if there is no improvement, another conversation will be warranted.
- Follow this conversation up with the PIP, outlining the details of the concern, the expectations you have for her and the timeframe in which she has to improve.
- Monitor progress.

**Miss Chip-on-Her-Shoulder:** Maria is a seasoned dental assistant with excellent chair-side skills. The trouble lies in her often angry, negative attitude. The rest of the dental



clinic staff go out of their way to avoid having to deal with her, and the resulting tense work atmosphere is affecting patients as well.

**Suggestion:**

- Invite her out for coffee to a location where you can have a private, confidential conversation.
- Let her know what you have observed, provide specific examples (without naming names, if possible) and explain how she is affecting the entire clinic. For instance you can say, “This attitude is making it difficult for us to work together, and some of the staff and a few patients have also noticed a change in the office atmosphere.”
- Ask her if there is something happening in her personal life that may be influencing her behaviour; show empathy and concern. Ensure she understands that she needs to improve her attitude immediately and that you are there to support her in making the change.
- Draft the PIP accordingly, including specific examples and your expectations going forward. For example, “Miss Chip needs to immediately refrain from any further unprofessional or argumentative behaviour and tone when addressing peers and co-workers. Miss Chip has to change her tone and manner from one that is viewed by others as disrespectful, to a professional and respectful approach.”
- Monitor progress. (Individual dentists can decide to use this strategy or determine one based on their particular office situation.)

**Miss Kiss-Up, Kick-Down:** Jen is the clinic co-ordinator and has a great relationship with the clinic owner. However, she acts in a passive-aggressive, manipulative manner with the rest of the staff. The clinic is losing its best talent as the other employees can no longer deal with her toxic behaviour. “I had a patient’s mother come up to me and ask me if our new clinic co-ordinator was the reason her son’s favourite hygienist had quit,” said one dentist, who asked not to be identified.



**Suggestion:**

- Dealing with master manipulators is extremely difficult, especially since they are so good at managing up, and it is the clinic owner who needs to recognize the issue and deal with it.
- Red flags the clinic owner should watch out for include:
  - Increased staff turnover
  - An office environment that is becoming increasingly stressful
  - Feedback from other staff that tends to centre around the manipulator.
- Start conducting exit interviews; you will often find that all paths lead to the manipulator.
- Conduct a formal investigation using a third-party investigator (such as an employment lawyer or human resources professional) once you have gathered data from the exit interviews. (Remember, workplace harassment and bullying are against the law.)
- Present the manipulator with your concerns and the data you have gathered. Get her side of the story. If the behaviour is egregious enough, immediate termination may be warranted. If not, provide her with a disciplinary letter outlining a formal written warning, with monitoring for possible retaliatory behaviours, such as escalation of the behaviour with co-workers who were involved in the investigation process.

These situations may be more relevant in a larger dental practice than in a small one. But regardless of the practice size, each employee’s behaviour is felt acutely by the entire team and affects the performance of the clinic. Turning a blind eye can affect patient care, customer service and your practice’s reputation. It’s better to deal with a problem swiftly; if there is still no improvement, or if the situation is not salvageable, discuss your termination options with an HR professional or employment lawyer, and move as quickly as possible to make it happen. Your employees and patients will thank you for it. 📌

See the “Checklist” on page 34

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# Checklist

**SOI Model for delivering feedback:**

**Standard** – what the expected or standard behaviour is

**Observation** – what you observed, provide specific examples

**Impact** – what impact did the observed behaviour have on the customer/team/clinic?

**Do:**

- Your homework; ensure you have all your facts lined up via your own observations of the employee, feedback you've received from others, etc.
- Determine whether the issue is a performance issue or a discipline issue.
- Bring your concerns up one-on-one with the employee in a private, confidential setting as soon after the observed behaviour as possible.
- Frame your feedback by first describing the set standard (e.g. your shift starts at 8 a.m.), explain what you observed and give specific examples, then let the employee know the results or impact of her or his behaviour on the team/goal/clinic, etc.
- Follow up the initial conversation with a performance improvement plan (PIP) or disciplinary letter with specific action items, with timing for completion. The length of the PIP depends on the type of behaviour you are trying to modify, and can be anywhere from 30 to 90 days.
- Allow the employee to add his or her own suggestions for improvement and add these to the PIP.
- Ensure the employee signs the PIP to acknowledge receipt (they are not signing to say they agree with it); then keep the documentation on file for future reference.
- Encourage the employee to book weekly or biweekly meetings with you to talk about progress.
- At the end of the PIP let the employee know if they were successful or not.
- If successful, provide them with a letter stating they were successful but include the caveat that this improvement needs to be sustained for continued employment.
- If not successful, review your options with an HR professional or employment lawyer.

**Don't:**

- Wait until the annual performance review discussion to bring a problem to the employee's attention.
- Sugar-coat the message to such an extent that the employee walks away thinking there is no concern.
- Allow the situation to fester; you will lose your best and brightest people if they see that nothing is done about poor employee behaviour and performance.
- Wait too long to terminate, if that is the final decision. Do it quickly and compassionately.

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