

WHITE PAPER

# Problem Employees

Identify and Manage Them Before  
They Impact Your Business and Career



Center for  
Creative  
Leadership®

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## Introduction

Do you have a problem employee on your team? If so, you're not alone. It seems that almost everyone has worked with a problem employee at some point in their career. And if you ask people to describe these employees, you could fill a dictionary with the colorful adjectives used. Here are just a few of our personal favorites, culled from popular press articles and from our interactions with leaders around the globe:

- bad apple
- hot mess
- passive aggressive
- bully
- liar
- perpetual victim
- demanding
- martyr
- slacker
- drama king/queen
- micromanager
- tantrum-thrower
- explosive
- narcissist

Despite the seeming prevalence of problem employees, though, some perplexing questions remain. Is there a litmus test to determine who is a problem employee and who isn't? Is a colleague who digs in his heels on certain issues a "problem employee"? How about a team member who explodes after a prolonged period of stress? Are the business articles with caricatures of problem employees ["the droner" (boring), "the Einstein" (arrogant)] accurately capturing the issues facing managers today?

Unfortunately, there has not been a lot of data available to help leaders to resolve these questions and define the characteristics of a problem employee in a meaningful way. As a result, our team at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL<sup>®</sup>) designed a study to learn more and to determine which of the many characterizations of problem employees hold true.

We started by asking a global sample of 214 leaders to describe a current or past problem employee. Using a rigorous research methodology, we coded their responses and developed a typology of the most prevalent characteristics mentioned (see Appendix). We also asked the leaders to rate the impact of the problem employee on their team and on their personal leadership career.

This paper features the results we uncovered. It also includes best practices for how to provide feedback to problem employees to encourage them to stop poor behavior and replicate desired behavior. The process we recommend also increases the likelihood that your feedback will be heard and understood by problem workers, even those who are resistant to criticism and change. We hope you will find the information useful as you set out to identify and manage problem employees in your organization.



## The Business Impact of Problem Employees

Problem employees aren't just an aggravation. They can be a real business liability. Recent research shows that underperforming employees can cost an organization \$6,000 to \$8,000 a day by reducing the motivation and effectiveness of the entire work group (Menon & Thompson, 2016).

Just consider the experiences of Nancy, a leader who "inherited" a problem employee named Andy. By the time Nancy took on her new role as team director, Andy had been with the company for years. By the end of Nancy's second day on the job, however, she was seeing problem employee warning signs. When Andy's name would come up, people would roll their eyes. When she held one-on-one meetings with her new team members, discussions about "what could improve" always seemed to involve Andy. His coworkers described him as someone who routinely dropped the ball and missed deadlines. And he never took accountability for his actions.

Over the next few months, Nancy experienced "Andy issues" firsthand. He would regularly show up late and unprepared for client-facing meetings, wearing clothing that was far too casual for the situation. Project groups began to ask Nancy if they could move forward without his involvement. "We'll just need to do his work anyway," they would say.

Despite his shortcomings, everyone seemed to feel Andy was a really nice guy. A single father and recent empty-nester, he was a doting parent and a good friend. It wasn't uncommon for him to be out changing a colleague's flat tire or talking for hours with a colleague who was going through tough times. And everyone sympathized with his desire to find a new partner. When Andy started leaving to go on dates, no one complained. They told Nancy they hoped a happier home life would help him get things in order at work.



Nancy wasn't sure what to make of Andy. Was he a nice guy, but a lousy employee? Was he someone who once had a lot to contribute and just needed to get back on track? And did the possibility that he might one day improve even matter if Andy was habitually unprofessional and unproductive?

The experiences of Nancy and her team aren't unusual. Organizations often spend significant time, money, mindshare, and emotion trying to figure out what makes problem employees tick and how to best manage them.

In our leadership development programs at CCL, for example, we find that problem employees are never far from the thoughts of course participants. In fact, many of the questions fielded by our faculty members relate to challenges with certain "special" employees. "How can I get Zoe to stop being so negative? Her attitude ruins every meeting." Or, "I understand that giving feedback to employees is important, but if I called Casey on his poor performance, I think it would just get worse!"

When we ask a group to reflect on a current problem employee as part of a module on conflict management, we are far more likely to hear "Can I choose more than one!?" than to hear "What do you mean by 'problem employee'?"



## Characteristics of Problem Employees: What Our Study Has to Say

If you want to be an effective leader, it is important to identify problem employees and confront their behavior. But what does that problem behavior really look like? What characteristics separate chronic problem employees from those who are just having a bad day or a bad week?

When our CCL research team asked leaders around the globe to describe their problem employees, we found a cluster of 11 prevalent characteristics (see Appendix for full list).

- 1. Poor Job Performance (25%).** One quarter of our leaders said their problem employee produced work that simply wasn't up to expectations. Others constantly had to pick up the slack. These individuals were described with phrases like "in over her head" and "failed to deliver."
- 2. Doesn't Work Well With Others (24%).** Another quarter of respondents identified their problem employee as someone others didn't like. These were individuals who had a difficult time forming positive relationships with coworkers, clients, and customers.
- 3. Not Responsive to Coaching or Feedback (20%).** Our leaders said many of their problem employees were impervious to feedback and failed to make needed improvements.
- 4. Resistant to Change (17%).** A significant number of the leaders surveyed also said their problem employee wasn't open to change. Some were simply resistant, others outright refused to change at all.
- 5. Lacked Responsibility for Their Own Actions (17%).** Study participants said their problem employees frequently failed to take responsibility for their actions and were more likely to blame others around them for poor outcomes.
- 6. Negative Attitude (14%).** Problem employees were described as individuals grounded in negativity who never had anything positive to say.
- 7. Poor Work Ethic (14%).** Several said their problem employees exhibited a lack of commitment to their work. Descriptions included "left early every day" and "regularly didn't meet deadlines."

# 11

## Problem Employee Behaviors As Described by Leaders Worldwide



|   |  |
|---|--|
|    | <b>1</b> Poor Job Performance            |
|    | <b>2</b> Can't Work Well with Others     |
|    | <b>3</b> Doesn't Respond to Coaching     |
|    | <b>4</b> Resistant to Change             |
|    | <b>5</b> Not Responsible for Own Actions |
|    | <b>6</b> Negative Attitude               |
|    | <b>7</b> Poor Work Ethic                 |
|    | <b>8</b> Arrogance                       |
|  | <b>9</b> Poor Communication Skills       |
|  | <b>10</b> Skills Don't Match Job         |
|  | <b>11</b> "Yes, But . . ." Weaknesses    |

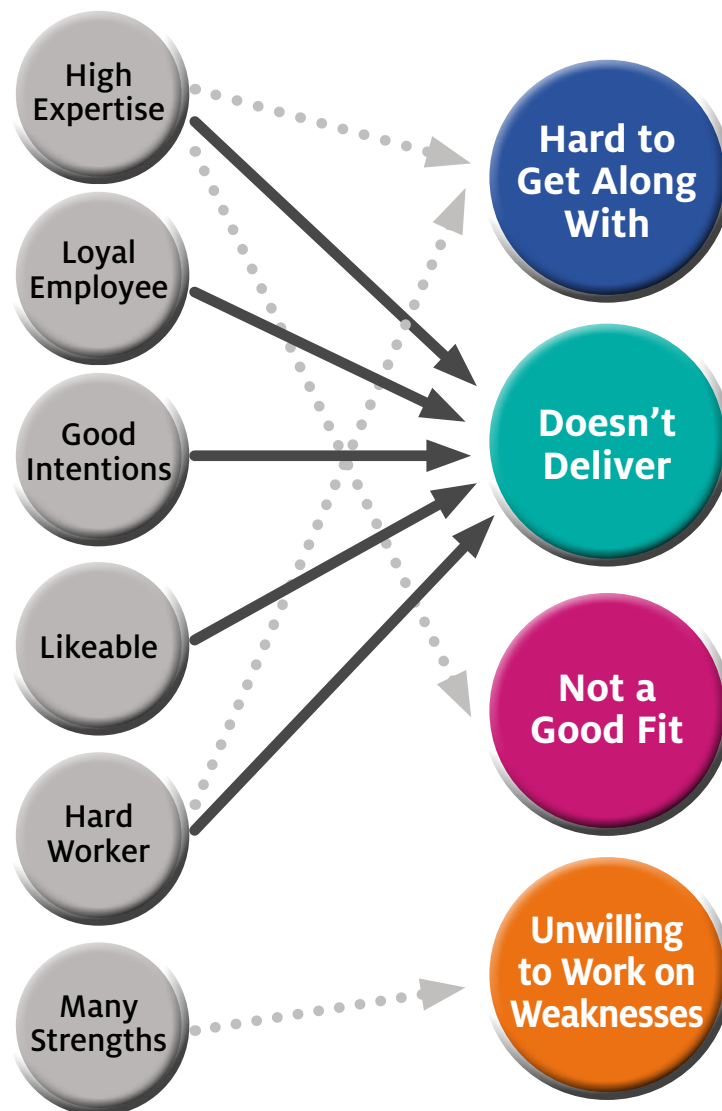
- 8. Arrogance (11%).** Problem employees were described as “know-it-alls” and as individuals who believed they were “always right.”
- 9. Ineffective Communication Skills (10%).** Some said their problem employees didn't listen and didn't inform anyone when they were unable to meet expectations.
- 10. Skills Don't Match the Job (10%).** Certain problem employees were described as being in the wrong role, with their performance suffering as a result. Others were described as having been promoted too quickly and “not able to cut it at the senior level.”
- 11. “Yes, But . . .” employees (10%).** Some problem employees had their strong suits, but those strengths were overwhelmed by major weaknesses. One example: “Smart, but did not know how to build relationships with clients.”

**We also found that 70% of respondents reported that their problem employee showed 2 or more of the problem behaviors, 45% showed 3 or more problem behaviors, and 24% showed 4 or more problem behaviors. This means that when someone is thought to be a “problem employee,” he or she is likely to be experiencing several different issues that need to be addressed.**



## Taking a Deeper Dive into the “Yes, But . . .” Employee

When analyzing our list of top 10 problem employee behaviors, we were particularly intrigued by the “Yes, But . . .” type. That curiosity led us to take a deeper look at this specific category of problem employee, where we found nine distinct sub-types of the “Yes, But . . .”





**The nine distinct sub-types are:**

**High expertise but hard to get along with (26%)**

**Many strengths but unwilling to work on weaknesses (26%)**

**Loyal employee but doesn't deliver (22%)**

**Likeable but doesn't deliver (22%)**

**High expertise but not good fit for role (13%)**

**Good intentions but doesn't deliver (9%)**

**Hard worker but doesn't deliver (9%)**

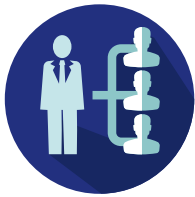
**High expertise but doesn't deliver (9%)**

**Hard worker but hard to get along with (4%)**

Though we found that certain sub-types (e.g., high expertise but hard to get along with) were more prevalent in our sample than others (e.g., hard worker but hard to get along with), it's entirely possible that you experience these types of employees in different proportions in your organization or industry. The key takeaway here is that evaluating employee behavior is not always clear cut. Employees often have both positives and negatives. And it's this complexity that makes it hard for managers to confront their employees. However, as we review in the next section, a manager's inability to do so can have negative consequences for the employee, the team, and one's career.

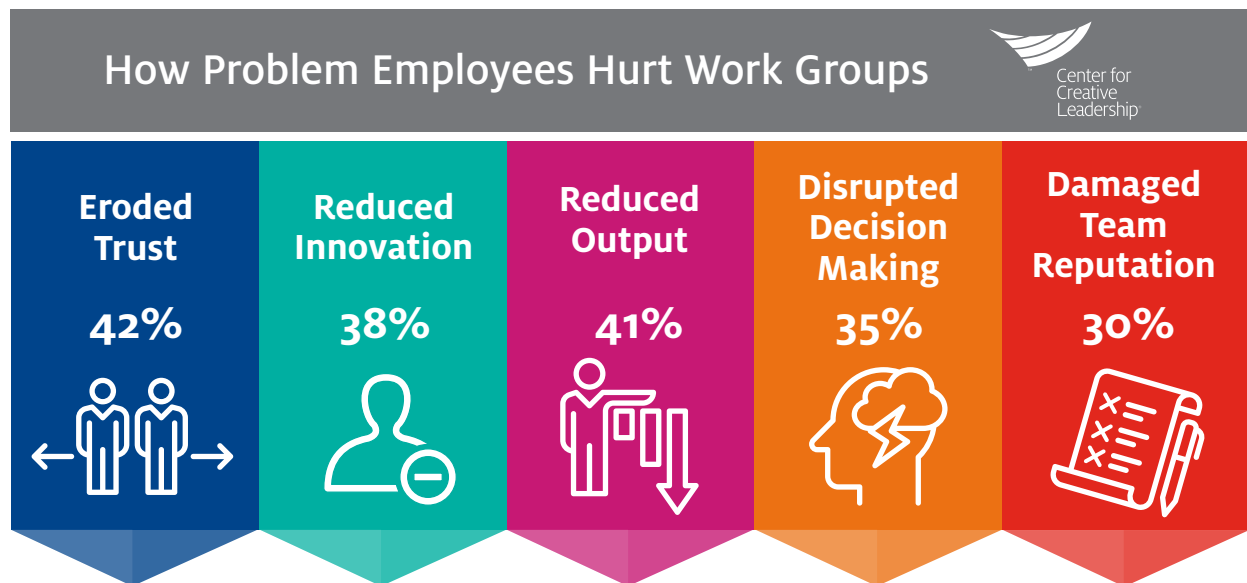
Though our study asked participants to describe the behavior of problem employees (either individual contributors or manager-level employees), our results also align with CCL's well-known research on the behavior of derailed leaders. Derailed executives are those who, after reaching the general manager

level, are fired, demoted, or held on a career plateau. Right up to the point of derailment, the superiors of the derailed executives saw them as having high potential for advancement, impressive track records, and solidly established leadership positions (Leslie & Chappelow, 2015). In other words, derailed executives had both positives and negatives. The good news is that derailment is preventable (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1989/2005), and leaders who develop a high level of self-awareness and become familiar with the warning signs of derailment can create a plan for behavioral change to avoid such a crisis. The good news for problem employees is that their behavior is also correctable. Research has shown that employees who are given feedback by their managers can develop greater self-awareness and create a plan for behavioral change to avoid the dangers of career derailment (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). In this white paper, we give you tips about how to confront these employees and help them get better.



## Double Trouble The Impact on Work Groups and Bosses

When we asked the leaders in our survey to rate the extent to which their problem employee impacted five work group-related outcomes, a significant percentage of them agreed that their problem employee eroded trust, reduced output and innovation, and had a negative impact on both decision-making processes and the team's reputation. These results show that problem employees have a detrimental impact on trust and cohesion within a work group. When team members don't feel safe sharing their ideas and input, teams are much less effective (Edmondson, 1999).



*This graphic shows the percentage of participants who said their problem employee negatively impacted aspects of their work group either to a "great" or a "very great" extent.*

We also asked participants to rate the extent to which their own effectiveness as a leader was impacted by their problem employee. Participants also considered four other personal outcomes, including their reputation, their desire to stay in their department and organization, and the likelihood of promotion. Almost one quarter of respondents identified their problem employee as having impacted their effectiveness to either a “great” or “very great” extent (Figure 2). This confirms the belief that problem employees can have a negative impact on the career of a leader. When too much time is spent dealing with these employees, managers end up having less time to handle other pressing leadership issues, such as strategy and innovation. In this way, problem employees can indirectly damage the careers of their managers.



*This shows the percentage of participants who said their problem employee impacted them personally, either to a “great” or a “very great” extent.*



## Why It's Important to Confront Problem Employees

As our study shows, problem employees can have a negative impact on their work group and on the career of their boss. With the right moves, however, you may be able to shift the dynamic and produce a more positive outcome for everyone involved. You just have to be willing to confront your problem employee about unacceptable behaviors.

We have long known that confronting problem employees results in better outcomes for organizations and for leaders themselves. A classic study of managers shows the benefit of taking action: Leaders who consistently confronted problem employees tended to achieve better overall team performance (O'Reilly & Weitz, 1980).

**Why does confronting problems improve results?** In some instances, confronting a problem employee can result in positive behavioral changes. It may also signal to others what effective behavior looks like, and it indicates that managers are paying attention to the performance of the team. Finally, other group members may be more motivated when they know that problem employees are being properly dealt with, rather than being ignored or left to diminish the work and morale of the team.

If you need further motivation, consider this:

**Leaders who confront problem employees are viewed as more promotable by their bosses.**

*(McCauley & Lombardo, 1990)*

Despite the positive benefits that can come from dealing with problem employees, it isn't a strong suit for most leaders. CCL's extensive database of competency ratings for 25,000 leaders around the globe shows that confronting problem employees ranks lowest among the 16 key leadership competencies we track (Young, Gentry, & Bendixen, 2016).

Perhaps the skills gap is the reason many of us tend to bury our heads in the sand instead of tackling the issue head-on. Learning a few feedback techniques can make the process much less overwhelming. Rather than saving up all the issues you encounter for one big confrontation, you can break things down into small, digestible steps that work better for you and your employees.



## An Easy-to-Use Feedback Model

CCL recommends that you give feedback using the Situation—Behavior—Impact (SBI™) model. SBI feedback is fact-based and judgment-free. As a result, you are less likely to raise hackles and make your employee defensive. That means your feedback is more likely to be received and heard, especially by those who are resistant to feedback and change.

Here's how the three-step SBI process works.

**Situation.** Describe a recent situation in which you observed inappropriate behavior you would like your problem employee to change. Be as specific as possible. Avoid generalizations and vague language like “every time you have a deadline . . .” which can lead to disagreement right from the start.

**Behavior.** Be equally specific about the behaviors you've witnessed. Don't share opinions or make assumptions. Instead, focus on objective facts—what the situation was and what occurred. And deliver the feedback as soon after the incident as possible, while memory is fresh.

**Impact.** Finally, focus on the impact of the behavior you observed, whether on you personally, on your team, or on others. Again, be specific and nonjudgmental. Rather than saying something like “it's clear to me that you are very rude and you just don't care about helping our team,” share what you experienced, saw, or heard. Don't say anything about the other's intention.

“During today's 9 a.m. meeting, while I was at the front of the room sharing March sales numbers (*the recent situation*), you interrupted me three times when I was mid-sentence, and challenged the information on my slides twice in front of the whole team (*the behavior*). As a result, I was completely flustered and lost my train of thought. Because I couldn't finish the presentation the way I planned, I was unable to make the case for the budget our team needs, and I feel really frustrated (*the impact on you and on the group/outcome*).”



Here's an example of the complete, three-step process in action:

Consider how the same feedback might be delivered in a less effective manner. A manager giving that feedback might choose to label the behavior, or the person, as “rude” or “arrogant” (e.g., “it is so rude to interrupt”) instead of just describing what occurred. Or the manager might choose to deliver the feedback weeks later in a formal review and generalize the situation as “during meetings, you interrupt,” which can catch someone off guard. If that occurs, the employee is likely to spend his or her energy trying to remember the specifics of the situation, or countering with examples of meetings when that did not occur. Neither of those reactions are conducive to having a developmental conversation that will lead to improvement.

You'll note that at no point in the SBI example does the feedback provider make any assumptions about the employee's intentions or worth as a person or an employee. Instead the focus is on impact, which makes it easier to discuss the behavior objectively. It turns the process of providing feedback into a conversation that can lead to better understanding and, ideally, to a shift in the problem behavior.



## Reinforcing Desired Behaviors

For the best results, feedback shouldn't be something people associate only with negative experiences. Giving positive feedback can encourage the continuation of positive behaviors that your problem employee might exhibit. By giving timely and specific feedback when the employee is doing things you value, you may improve the odds that the behavior will continue.

Consider Claire, who usually submits projects to her boss, Mary, days after they are due. Mary finds Claire's lateness to be a big concern and would classify her as a "problem employee." Today, though, Mary is happily surprised to find that Claire has submitted her current project on time. Rather than just saying thank you and sighing with relief, Mary would do better to reinforce the behavior using SBI feedback. It might go something like this:

**"Claire, when you handed in your project on time this morning, I was thrilled. Knowing that I can count on you to meet deadlines makes me grateful to have you on my team. Richard and Warren were able to start the next stage of the design, and it looks like we may be able to submit the proposal ahead of schedule. That can only improve the odds that we will win the grant we need for this project. Thank you; please keep it up."**

While sharing this positive feedback does not guarantee that Claire will no longer miss deadlines, it will certainly encourage her and help her better understand the positive impact of timeliness. It may also make Claire more receptive when Mary needs to provide developmental feedback on problematic aspects of her performance that still need work.

## 10 Feedback Best Practices

As you use the SBI feedback model with problem employees, keep these 10 best practices in mind (Gentry & Young, 2017).

1. **Be timely.** The importance of timeliness can't be overemphasized. Saving up all the problem behaviors you've observed over many days or months and presenting them all at once is likely to lead to resistance, not change. Deal with issues one by one, as they crop up.
2. **Be open.** Be open to a different perspective if the employee provides one. While the impact may remain the same and the behavior may still not be ideal, understanding the motivation may shift your perception and lead to a better understanding.
3. **Keep it short.** Limit the amount of time you devote to providing feedback. Avoid rambling. Just describe the situation, the behavior, and the impact. Then stop talking and let the employee respond. SBI feedback is the start of a conversation; it is not a monologue.
4. **Show empathy.** Problem employees are more likely to accept and use the feedback you share if they perceive that you genuinely care about their welfare and don't worry that you are out to get them. So take a caring approach as you deliver feedback.
5. **Don't use the "sandwich" technique.** Don't tuck negative feedback between two positive pieces of feedback. Your problem employee may assume two out of three isn't bad and think they're doing just fine, or they may grow wary of positive feedback and assume that you are only using it to couch negative comments. Neither option is desirable.
6. **Give positive feedback when it is deserved.** Reinforcement may lead to further positive outcomes. Just don't wrap positive feedback around the negative feedback that you want your problem employee to take seriously (See #5 above).



7. **Get the mix right.** Aim for at least a 3:1 ratio of positive feedback to negative feedback (see Gentry & Young, 2017). Studies show individuals are more likely to hear and embrace negative feedback when most feedback you give them over time is positive.
8. **Practice.** As you adopt the SBI feedback model, take time to rehearse. Think through precisely what you want to say and how you want to say it. You may want to write it down, to ensure that you are not accidentally ascribing intention to the behavior. Practicing in front of a mirror, or with a trusted friend or advisor, can also help.
9. **Don't try to be a "fixer."** Most of us aren't open to the notion of someone trying to change who we are. If your problem employee worries you are trying to do that, defenses will be raised and your feedback efforts will be wasted. Instead, simply help the individual become aware of behaviors that need to stop, start, or continue.
10. **Create a favorable environment for feedback.** Don't isolate your feedback-giving to problem employees. Work to build an environment where your entire team embraces and uses feedback for performance improvement. You can build a favorable feedback environment by
  - improving your credibility (know each individual's job requirements and performance standards; and inspire trust)
  - giving high-quality feedback
  - delivering feedback with care (tactful and considerate, with empathy)
  - providing the right amount of feedback (using the ratio in #7)
  - being available to give feedback on a regular basis
  - and encouraging others to actively seek feedback from you. This may be listed as #10, but it is essential for effective leadership outcomes to occur.



## What If Feedback Doesn't Work?

If you've repeatedly tried to provide feedback to your problem employee and it isn't working, it's time to consider other options. Sometimes we help people the most by guiding them to pursue opportunities better suited to their capabilities, though this should, of course, be approached with care. Seek involvement and counsel from a supervisor, the HR department, and/or legal counsel. Before you escalate a situation, be sure that you've made every effort to be fair, and that you have kept a written record of the problem behaviors, the impact of these behaviors, and the feedback that you delivered. This could reduce both pushback from your superiors or from the problem employee, and it may lower litigation risks or negative repercussions that might impact internal or public perceptions of your organization.

Here is a summary of best practices from Gilliland and Langdon (1998) that you should consider (Disclaimer: This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of best practices; you should consult an industrial/organizational psychologist and/or attorney when establishing companywide policies).

- Ensure that performance objectives and standards are established in advance, widely distributed, and clearly explained.
- Be available to answer questions and provide feedback as necessary. This will allow each of your team members ample opportunity to understand their performance expectations. When it comes time for a formal appraisal, employees should not be caught off guard by negative feedback.
- Be intentional about providing feedback regularly and in a timely manner, and document that you've done so. If the problem behaviors are not getting better, you will be able to prove that you have provided developmental feedback consistently over time and have a "paper trail" you can produce if needed.
- During the formal appraisal, give your problem employees an opportunity to discuss your interpretation of their performance and allow them to present any rebuttal evidence they might have. If you've set clear expectations, provided regular feedback, and have gone through the formal appraisal process, your HR team and legal counsel can be of greater help to you in finding a resolution.



## Wrapping It Up: A Call to Action

Now that you know the most prevalent characteristics of problem employees, you can begin to take action.

**If this paper has helped you to identify problem employees on your team**, it's time to begin sharing feedback on a regular basis. While we've yet to meet anyone who relishes the delicate task of confronting a problem employee, it is a skill that each of us can learn to do well. Waiting is never a smart choice; our study shows that problem employees have a negative impact on your work group and your career. What's more, failing to confront the issue does a disservice to both problem employee and your team as a whole. Your empathic feedback could help a struggling employee get back on track. And it will ensure that your team, as a whole, feels supported.

So be prepared and be brave. If you get nervous, remember that bosses who provide regular feedback on a weekly, if not daily, basis are seen as more effective (Gentry & Young, 2017). While change may not happen overnight, with time and perseverance, you are likely to see positive changes for your problem employee, your team, and your organization. But remember the wisdom of Jeannette Rankin: "You take people as far as they will go, not as far as you would like them to go." Your will, alone, cannot change a problem employee's behavior. Do your best, be empathic yet firm, and try to view this challenge as another leadership lesson in your own development as a leader.

**If this paper has helped you to identify some problem employee characteristics in your own behavior patterns**, don't worry! Think back on the words of Ernest Hemingway: "There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self." Self-awareness is the first essential step to developing as a leader, and it is a necessary, ongoing process, almost like a leadership "oil change." You need to set aside time—annually, weekly, or even better, daily—to do a quick self-evaluation of your own behaviors, and how they affect others and your team. You should also seek out candid feedback through in-person conversations with trustworthy colleagues or by engaging in a 360 assessment to better understand how others are experiencing you—right or wrong, good or bad. Remember that showing some vulnerability as a leader can engender more support and respect from colleagues. Modeling this self-improvement process can also be a great benefit to your team—if others follow your lead, it can help to turn around the downward trajectory of other problem employees or stop others from possible derailment.

Our organization was founded on the premise (and the research to support it) that leaders can develop. Don't be discouraged if you need to keep honing your skills; be grateful. As we often say here: the day you don't have anything else to learn is the day you should find something else to do. So, again, be prepared. And be brave. You can do this.

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## About the Authors

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**Sydney Siver** supported our CCL research team during our "problem employee" study. She now works as an analyst with Denison Consulting while pursuing her PhD in industrial/organizational psychology at Wayne State University. She previously worked with Paradigm Personality Labs. Sydney has a BS in psychology and a BA in sociology from the University of Georgia, as well as an MA in industrial/organizational psychology from East Carolina University.

To learn more about this topic or the Center for Creative Leadership's programs and products, please contact our Client Services team.

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# Appendix

## About the Research

- Data used for this white paper comes from leaders in CCL's Leading Insights panel polled June, 2016.
- Our final global sample included 214 members (men=107, women=107) with 71% coming from the U.S.
- These 214 leaders came from various organizational backgrounds, with the most being corporate (51%) followed by nonprofit (16%), education (13%), other (11%) and government (10%).
- Of our respondents, 10% were at C-level, 18% were executives, 32% directors, 30% managers of individual contributors, and 10% other.

## Procedure and Analysis

- Panel members completed an online survey that consisted of questions associated with problem employees. Members were asked: "In your own words, describe a specific 'problem employee'—a subordinate who directly reports to you or has reported to you in the past."
- Members were asked to keep this same "problem employee" in mind as they rated the extent (1 = to a very little extent or not at all, 5 = to a very great extent) to which this person has reduced their effectiveness as a leader, likelihood of a promotion, desire to stay in their department, desire to stay in the organization, reputation in the organization, trust within their work group, work group output, work group innovation, work group reputation in the organization, and work group decision-making processes.
- Several well-known sources were drawn on and reviewed to ensure that best practices for analyzing qualitative data were followed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Pratt, 2008).
- A team of four researchers coded the qualitative data. First, one coder independently categorized responses to the problem employee question. These categories were then aggregated to form a preliminary coding system by three additional members who made up the primary coding group. The coding system was then discussed among this group, refined, and consolidated for use on the whole sample. Each category was given a specific definition and example in order to calibrate coders on a common frame of reference. Each of the 214 responses were independently coded by two researchers, and inter-rater reliability was calculated as percent agreement (total number of times two raters agreed divided by total number of responses coded). Coder agreement ranged from 64%–99% (83% average). A third coder provided a final ruling on all existing disagreements. 27 distinct types of problem employees emerged. Mentions of indicators were then counted.
- All quantitative statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS.

## Key Findings

- Close to half of our participants reported that their problem employee impacted trust and output within their work group to “a great extent” or “a very great extent”; more than one-third of participants said work group innovation, decision-making processes, and reputation within organization were similarly impacted by the problem employee.
- Close to one quarter of respondents reported their problem employee impacted their effectiveness as a leader to “a great extent” or “a very great extent.” Slightly fewer leaders reported that their problem employee harmed their reputation within the organization, their desire to stay in their department or organization, and the likelihood of their promotion.
- The most frequently mentioned characteristics of problem employees spanned a range of distinct yet closely related issues. The top three mentioned, included “poor job performance,” “doesn’t work well with others,” and “not responsive to coaching or feedback.”
- There were two demographic differences in participant responses. Women were significantly more likely to report having a problem employee with “poor work ethic,” “lacks responsibility for own actions,” and “skills don’t match job.” Participants at larger organizations were more likely to report having greater numbers of problem employees who are “self-interested.”

## List of All Problem Employee Types

Poor Job Performance (25%)

Doesn’t Work Well with Others (24%)

Did not Respond to Coaching or Feedback (20%)

Lack of Responsibility for Own Actions (17%)

Resistant to Change (17%)

Lack of Initiative/Poor Work Ethic (14%)

Negative Attitude (14%)

Arrogant (11%)

Skills Don’t Match Job (10%)

Doesn’t Meet Work Deadlines (10%)

Lacks Effective Communication Skills (10%)

“Yes, But . . .” (10%)

Insubordinate (8%)

Low Self-Awareness (8%)

Lacks Professionalism (7%)

Dishonest (7%)

Overtly Aggressive (7%)

Emotionally Unstable (6%)

Self-Interested (6%)

Intimidating Management Style (5%)

Defensive (5%)

Confidential or Nothing (4%)

Disrespectful (4%)

Gossiper (4%)

Passive Aggressive (3%)

Chronically Absent (3%)

Substance Abuse Issue (1%)



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