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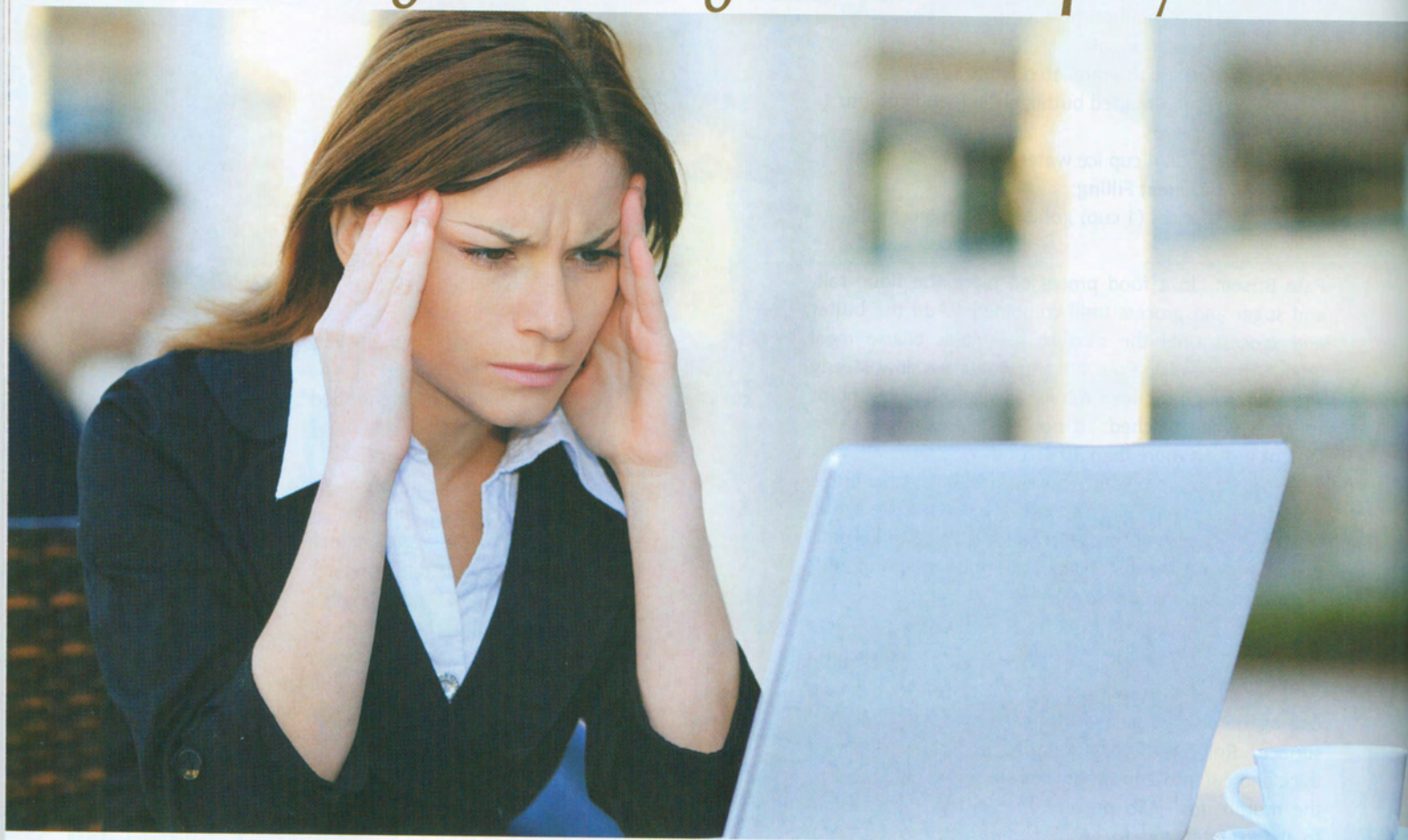
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Dealing With Disgruntled Employees



By Thekla Fagerlie-Madsen

You've worked with them. You've probably been one. Or you might currently be on the path to becoming....a disgruntled employee.

We laugh at characters and situations portrayed in "office" television shows. But it's not so funny if these episodes are closer to fact than fiction in your workplace. Personnel conflicts can lower office morale and productivity, and cost employers billions of dollars.

The key to diffusing potential employer/employee conflicts is communication, says Mike Bourgon, owner of Bourgon HR Solutions. "The employer needs to understand the employee's perspective and vice versa."

Headquartered in Stillwater, Minnesota, with offices in Atlanta, Georgia and Nashville, Tennessee, Bourgon works with companies to improve staff performance, assess employee risk, and manage human resources functions.

"Unhappy employees generally fall into six categories," Bourgon explains. He offers some solutions for employers and employees alike to help make the transition from "disgruntled employee" to "satisfied employee."

#1 Job Dissatisfaction

Otherwise known as "burnout", this occurs when people are bored with their job. "It's the lucky ones that get excited about going to work," Bourgon says, "while others may look outside the workplace to find motivation."

Solutions:

- Meet informally with employees and learn what motivates them.
- Have a formal evaluation and performance management system in place, including organizational structure, terms, conditions, and benefit explanations to promote employee perception of fairness.
- Implement monthly meetings with employees to discuss issues/concerns.

#2 Issues with the Boss

This one may be harder to recognize, and Bourgon recommends employing a "360 review" where managers ask their peers and employees to review their performance. If the manager has a good rapport with a variety of co-workers, employees may confide in them when problems arise without fear of retaliation.

Solutions:

- Build rapport with all levels of coworkers.
- Implement a "360 review" process to measure your effectiveness as a manager.
- Recognize employee efforts.

#3 Issues with Co-Workers

Employers may notice productivity problems in more than one person, or see a behavior change from someone's normal way of acting. "I had a standard rule with all my employees of 'No Surprises'," Bourgon explains. "If they had an issue coming up, don't keep it a secret. Let's discuss it."

Solutions:

- Maintain an open-door policy with employees.
- Set expectations before there's a problem.
- Engage in "win-win" bargaining with co-workers.
- Have an intervention strategy which may involve changing a business relationship, reporting level, or level of interaction.

#4 Blocked Career Path

While similar to job dissatisfaction, this can be a serious problem if an employee feels they can't get ahead or grow in their career. Behavior changes including: coming in late, missing days, long lunches, or developing substance abuse problems can signal employee frustrations.

Solutions:

- Work with employees to chart possible career paths.
- Set expectations on actions/skills needed to reach the "next step".

#5 Training/Educational Limitations

Again, this can relate back to job dissatisfaction or the blocked career path. "Perhaps a person can't get the training they need or their personal life is in the way," says Bourgon. In this case, managers can function as a coach or mentor, helping the employee to find the right resources to add to their knowledge.

Solutions:

- Inform employees of any programs or training the company offers.
- In the absence of corporate resources, mentor and teach employees from your experience.
- Guide employees to educational and personal programs outside the company.
- Establish a "university" within the company to provide in-house training and education.

#6 Terms and Conditions

Ambiguous policies or employment terms can cause problems, explains Bourgon, especially if there's a perception that someone else is getting better hours or a bigger bonus for the same job. It's about fairness in the workplace. "Some of these are a given and can't be changed. But doing a good job on the other five issues can help ease the pain."

- Have policies and procedures in place, even if you only have a few employees.
- Communicate with employees on the nature of policies, procedures, and company expectations. Δ

BECOME "UNGRUNTLED"

There are several strategies both employers and employees can utilize to ensure a good working environment for everyone.

EMPLOYER STRATEGIES

- Hire or outsource a dedicated Human Resource person to establish and address employment policies and procedures.
- Implement an evaluation system with goals, objectives, and monthly or quarterly reviews.
- Meet employees in informal, social situations and discover what motivates them.
- Build rapport with all levels of the organization.

- Assume a mentorship role with employees.
- Serve as a resource for corporate training programs and information.
- Serve as a resource for community training, higher education, and counseling programs.
- Teach managers how to interview and select good employees.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate!

EMPLOYEE STRATEGIES

Be honest and ask yourself if you fit into any of these categories. If not, you're one of the lucky ones, notes Bourgon. But if you see yourself in one of these categories, try to see things from your employers' perspective and take action:

- Understand your employers' policies/procedures and employment terms and conditions.
- Set your own goals and objectives and share them with your manager.
- Meet your manager and co-workers in informal, social settings and discover what motivates them.
- Build rapport with all levels of the organization.
- Ask your manager for their advice or guidance.
- Find out if your supervisor will work with you. If not, go to his supervisor. (Yes, this takes guts!)
- Seek out available corporate resources, training or mentoring programs.
- Seek out community resources such as counseling, vocational or higher education courses.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate!

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