

## ||| DILEMMAS

# When a key employee proves to be a handful



**SUSAN PINKER**  
PROBLEM SOLVING

**Dear Susan:**

I own a store and I have a key employee with excellent work ethics. She works hard, unsupervised, is punctual and innovative. My problem is that she has begun telling me what to do, when to take time off, and then she takes it upon herself to work overtime at double her usual pay. When she comes on buying trips, we often disagree about orders, and sometimes she disagrees vociferously with a customer's choice in the shop. From an aesthetic point of view, she's often right, but this can annoy the customer. I don't know how to approach her about her arrogance, and as she is a valuable employee, I don't want to lose her.

-- Who's Boss Here

**Dear Who's Boss,**

Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to offer this prize employee some feedback about her strengths and about what you hope she'll learn on the job -- mainly a few delicate pointers about boundaries. Notice how I don't call it negative feedback? There will be some of that too, but it's called constructive or corrective feedback and there should be little dollops for everyone on staff, leavened by praise and a supportive, non-sermonizing tone.

If you want employees to stay motivated, you should consider some

regular evaluation for all. Even students with McJobs want to feel they're getting somewhere. More importantly, this independent spirit of yours won't feel targeted for a dress-down if everyone is being evaluated. Chatting individually with each employee will give you a chance to take the pulse of your operation. Not what you had in mind, I'm sure, but it's like doing your taxes. Thinking about it is aversive but, when you actually hunker down, you learn things you never knew before.

Looking for quick and easy evaluation tools, I discovered that the management literature is full of boilerplate performance appraisals. They're widely used and widely hated; a survey of 48,000 CEOs, managers and employees revealed 87 per cent found them too generic to be of any use. A more informal evaluation, what one friend calls "a professional conversation," is more what you're after.

Research on effective verbal feedback comes mostly from doctors in training. Medical professionals have to learn to interact face-to-face, often about prickly information, and their faith in the scientific method means they've studied what works. One in-depth study of effective supervision in three countries (Canada, the U.S. and Britain) found that focusing on concrete skills and observable communication styles was most useful, "as long as the person was gentle and not hitting someone over the head with his or her mistakes," said one of the participants.

Another much-quoted finding, by University of Toronto researcher Wendy Levinson and Harvard psychologist Nalini Ambady, shows that people whose surgeons have warm, less dominant voices are less likely to

sue them, so it's not just what you say but how you say it that counts.

By all means, give feedback with warmth in your voice, make eye contact and make time for the give and take of questions and answers. Be specific about everything you appreciate about her work, describing every initiative that you find helpful. Her independent style is part of this package, but help her tweak it by shaping your feedback to specific circumstances.

So, instead of using adjectives such as arrogant, or generalizations that start with "you always . . ." say something like: "It's thoughtful of you to consider my schedule, but when you book your own hours, it affects my budget. Any other ideas that might help me are welcome. Let's make a plan to discuss them first." or "You have great taste and I like when you make suggestions to clients. I need to hear you listen carefully to what the client wants, too. How might you pick up these clues and make them work for us?"

But sensitive feedback is just part of this picture. Your ability to set clear boundaries for employees is the other..

**Dear Susan:**

I've been a consultant for the past 10 years, which has given me the flexibility to take care of family when necessary and to do volunteer work. This summer, I was approached by a client to take over a senior position. It sounded intriguing, although I advised the CEO that I was hesitant based on my lifestyle. I started the job and within a month realized that the position will not work in the long term. I have told the CEO that my transition is not progressing smoothly. So far, I have been exceeding all my contractual obligations -- which is my typical

operating mode -- but I'm starting to have trouble making it through each day. I know I'm stressed because my appetite is all but gone. How do I extricate myself in a way that minimizes disruption to the organization and allows me to retain as much of my reputation as possible? I'd particularly like to know what you think the appropriate timing should be..

-- Dancing on the Head of a Pin

**Dear Dancing,**

Start extricating yourself right now. You've already taken the first steps. You've warned your CEO that your transition is

bumpy. And you've recognized that your behaviour and mood are shifting -- your appetite is gone and it sounds as if your concentration may be evaporating, too. These could be signs of an imminent depression. If you wait until it strikes head on, you'll be in no shape for a graceful exit.

Talk to your CEO as soon as possible and explain that you can't stay indefinitely, but will stay long enough to ensure a fairly seamless handoff. Explain that this is a personal decision and that you want to leave before stress erodes your performance.

Then, ask how you can be helpful as you wrap up. Go to the meeting with a list of your projects and each one's status, as well as a proposal about your departure schedule.

Be prepared to negotiate the timing, perhaps easing out after a few weeks with half or flex hours until the transition is complete.

David Lépine, a partner in the Montreal executive search firm Hevey Lépine Cencherle, agreed that honesty is the best approach, and that "by bringing up the subject first, he or she just may be doing the boss a favour," especially if you are already having trouble getting through the day. While it's doubtful you'd ever throw your hat in another ring, record this experience for posterity should you be tempted to become a wage slave again..

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.*  
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