How the Grinch Stole the Workplace



By Erin Gloeckner

Resource Type: Risk eNews

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices

It’s normal to have a cranky day at work, but string together too many cranky days and you might start sounding like the Grinch. You’ve worked with a Grinch before—that employee who makes snide remarks, starts rumors, complains without end, or uses body language and other behaviors to display his or her misery. Most people think dealing with Grinches is just part of work, and don’t realize how damaging these depressing coworkers really are. An article on Inc.com discusses how ‘toxic’ coworkers push your brain into super-stress mode, which can literally damage your brain and severely impair your ability to perform well at work.

Classic Grinch Archetypes

You’re likely to experience these common Grinch personalities at any job. Learn how to recognize them and quickly distance yourself before the drama gets out of hand.

- **Underminers**: These workplace bullies purposefully put their failures and challenges on other colleagues, often pitting coworkers against each other or placing blame on others after performing poorly themselves. Underminers can take down your best employees and make themselves look better in the process.
- **Drama Queens**: Whether it’s water cooler gossip or break room badmouthing, these colleagues push workplace drama to the limit, and they blab to anyone who will listen. Engage a drama queen and you run the risk of reputation ruin or adding to the drama yourself.
- **Whiners**: Nobody likes the coworker that complains about everything, and doesn’t recognize that *everyone* in the organization is working hard – not just him or her! Whiners make a whole team feel more miserable, and they often try to shirk their duties or drop their challenging projects on other employees.

How Managers Fail at Fighting the Grinch

Whether purposefully cruel or unintentionally dismal, a Grinch’s traits are tough to stifle and often, even tough to acknowledge. Oftentimes, we allow Grinches to run wild in our workplaces because their negativity is so overwhelming that no one has the heart or know-how to stop it. From personal observation, I have witnessed the following failure patterns in managers who just can’t take down a Grinch.

- **Ignoring it**: I have seen a manager gossip with employees about a Grinch—a fellow employee—behind his or her back. Obviously the manager *knew* how damaging the Grinchy glumness was, but she did not

have the guts to properly confront the employee or offer critical behavioral feedback. This went on for months until everyone in the organization began to loathe the Grinch… yet the Grinch remained on staff so employees began loathing the hopeless manager as well.

- **Being too sweet about it**: Similarly, I've watched managers attempt to address grumpy Grinches, but fail to do so effectively. Managers who are uncomfortable with providing feedback will often sugarcoat it, which detracts from the employee's ability to identify and correct a behavioral issue. Some managers fail to provide constructive criticism, reachable performance goals, and clear consequences; instead, they offer kind or pitying remarks to the Grinch. Other managers decide that the Grinch is here to stay, and it's up to everyone else on the team to pick up the slack.
- **Asking an employee to handle it**: A classic managerial failure, just slightly different from ignoring a Grinch, is asking an employee to deal with the Grinch for you. I once attended a lunch meeting with the manager of my own supervisor, who wanted to speak with me about my supervisor's low performance and unprofessional behavior. I was so relieved that the manager had taken note of my supervisor's overwhelmingly Grinchy outlook, and I believed that the manager would offer performance feedback to my supervisor. Shockingly, the manager expressed her dire concerns, then asked me to provide performance feedback *to my own supervisor*. The manager was ineffective and cowardly, and I instantly lost respect for her.
- **Causing more conflict**: Sadly, many managers and other employees aren't able to distance themselves from Grinches, so they end up adding to the turmoil themselves. A manager might confront a Grinch in an angry or inappropriate manner; multiple managers or employees might gang up on the Grinch; or team members might secretly spur gossip about the Grinch while he or she trudges on, untamed. Failure to address Grinchy behavior will enable a Grinch to grow until his or her gloom engulfs the whole organization.

How to Improve at Managing Toxic Staff:

- **Nip it in the bud**: Quench quarrels and rumors when you first hear them; coach employees at their first signs of toxicity; don't hesitate – stop the spread before it turns to wildfire. If you allow the behavior to continue unaddressed, you risk the chance that the behavior will continue to worsen.
- **Foster a team vibe**: If employees care for each other—even if only in a professional sense—they are less likely to express negative, hurtful emotions. Reach out to your employees as individuals, but be sure to appeal to their group identity as well. Although 'teambuilding' may sound tacky, a little camaraderie goes a long way.
- **Rule the roost**: Teaching by example is a key leadership skill. If your leadership style promotes values like respect, professionalism, caring, and sincerity, most employees will follow your example. If you're constantly sniffing around for office gossip or making catty remarks behind closed doors, your employees will pick up on that, too. Be an example of the kinds of values you want to promote in your workplace.
- **Lay down the law**: One of the toughest things to do as a manager is to discipline or terminate an employee. The benefit of providing frequent coaching or performance reviews is that when it comes time to terminate, you can be sure that you gave the employee every opportunity to succeed. At that point, be confident in your decision and recognize that you've given the employee the chance to step up to the plate, and he or she just hasn't been able to meet your requirements.

Lastly, as we learned from the loved children's story How the Grinch Stole Christmas!, remember that even the most toxic team members usually have the capacity to change. With sincere coaching and clear, constructive, critical feedback you may be able to turn negativity into renewed positivity. If these methods don't work, then it's time to consider asking the Grinch to leave Whoville.

Erin Gloeckner is the former Director of Consulting Services at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center.