

Waiting for the one big event - why we are not tackling extreme difficulty behaviour effectively.

Over the past ten years of running the EDB Programme (Dealing with extreme difficulty and Persistent workplace behaviour) as open ACAS courses across the UK as well as numerous in house workshops there are some very consistent questions asked.



These include:

- “How did we get these people in our workplace?”
- “Why do we seem to hold on to them?”
- “Why are we unable to deal with them promptly and effectively”

Although there are a number of answers to each specific question there are I believe some core fundamental reasons why this type of behaviour is too prevalent and is not addressed promptly enough. In my next article I will address the issue of organisations being “too reasonable” with people exhibiting this type of behaviour. But before that another key issue is that of “waiting for the one big event”

Managers and HR professionals are well aware of an EDB and their disruptive behaviour but often make the mistake of waiting and hoping, in some cases, that the individual will commit a one off gross disciplinary which the organisation is then able to immediately dismiss the individual for.

Alas as I so often state in my EDB workshops with most EDB’s such a one off gross disciplinary is not going to happen. Their behaviour is often not even enough for disciplinary action and certainly not enough in one event for significant action. With this in mind it is vital that organisations consider and address “patterns of behaviour”

If you track back over the past six to twelve months you will often see a clear pattern of disruptive behaviours which when put together clearly indicate disruptive, manipulative and poor behaviour. On their own each event may be considered annoying or even disrespectful to a manager or against the ethos and values of the organisation but never enough to consider disciplinary action. Accumulatively they show a very different picture and highlight clear EDB behaviours which include:


- Actions and behaviours that average members of staff do not do or undertake.
- A consistent “blocking” of management or organisational actions to resolve issues either highlighted by or instigated by the EDB.
- Actions and behaviours which are not reasonable when all factors are taken into consideration.

Can such a pattern of negative and disruptive behaviour be used? I believe that it can and it has been shown to be appropriate in key employment cases. Other considerations are what you would consider to be extreme difficult behaviour or another term well cited, that of workplace deviance. I often use the terms from the slide below as a good bench mark around the type of behaviour we are talking about and prompt organisations to consider how much an EDB is violating their organisational norms especially if you start to consider a pattern of behaviour.

Definitions / Terminology

Workplace Deviance

Behaviour that violates significant organisational norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organisation, its members, or both.




(Robinson and Bennett 1995)
cited in Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham 2010 P120

Managing an EDB - Rule of Three

The number three is important in making judgements and predictions.

The Rule of Three indicates that the third repeated event is a pivotal point in perceiving an emerging pattern.

(Carlson & Shu 2007)



Polyvagal Theory in Therapy - Dana 2018 p173

What is a pattern and what amount of and type of events may be linked. In response to what is a pattern I draw on my “rule of three” basically any more than two events suggest a pattern and if the behaviours correspond to my three points listed above around “normal workplace behaviour” “blocking behaviours” “and those looked at in the cold light of day as just unreasonable” then you start to have all the necessary components to take action.

In a follow up article I will look at the thorny issue of reasonableness and how that is manipulated and misconstrued in the workplace when considering EDB / Workplace Deviance.

Martin has specialised in dealing with difficult personality types in the workplace. For further information on his workshops and training programmes have a look at his web site www.taking-control.co.uk or contact him directly on 07 973 410 010.

