

# MANAGING LEGACY EMPLOYEES, AND OTHERS YOU DIDN'T HIRE

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*When you join an established department as manager, or when company policy requires you to take contractors someone else hires, you can encounter anything from exasperation to great joy.*

*Three cases demonstrate effective techniques for working with writers you didn't hire. From the contracted incompetent, through the terrified junior, to the competent team, the cases explore what happened, why, and the techniques used.*

*These techniques include creative use of the basics such as planning, record-keeping, scheduling and trouble-shooting. Good skills in listening and observing, are matched with clear identification of purpose and an ability to simplify.*

## THREE CASES

### *The Incompetent Sociopath*

**The background:** For a large documentation project, a male contract writer was hired by the engineering manager, who actively resisted input or assistance from the documentation project manager. In retrospect, the man's resumé stated that he had worked for organizations and completed projects that seemed to fit the project needs. However, the engineering manager did not check with previous employers, nor with references, and probably looked at samples of work the writer could not prove he had written.

As the project proceeded, the writer argued, found fault, had better ideas, demanded changes to the product, and produced no writing. The engineering manager refused to listen to criticism of the writer, and refused to provide another writer.

**The challenge:** How to get the writer to write useful materials, or get him replaced.

**What happened:** After a few weeks of frustration, the documentation project manager required the writer to write his own plan for accomplishing the goals of his contract within the scheduled time. Within three weeks the writer had proved the cost of keeping him on, in missed deadlines and late deliveries, was fired and replaced with a competent writer.

**The techniques:** Prove with tangible, irrefutable evidence the competence or incompetence of the writer.

Do so with plans, logs, agreements, schedules, drafts, and reports.

Start with a short meeting, where you ask the writer to read over the project plan. Point out what he was hired to accomplish and ask what he intends to do. Request that the writer write his own goals, based on the requirements of the project, to meet the project schedule and deliverables for which he was contracted. Tell him to include only his own deliverables, whether draft, review, edit, or final version, with the amount of time and the date of delivery for each.

Then track progress together on a daily basis. Excuses are unacceptable. Don't listen to them.

In written progress records and reports to the hiring authority, report schedule reality, what was delivered, and what was not. If something was delivered, but unacceptable, say so and attach a copy with your written comments. Always keep a dated copy of everything.

Keep a log: a written record with dates, times, places, names, and your version of events for every meeting and activity, whether in person or on the phone.

Copy to a file every bit of writing produced by the questionable writer, including memos, drafts, plans, reports, agreements, and notes.

When you have enough evidence to prove incompetence, demonstrate it to your superior with something like, "If [writer's name] continues on his contract, the schedule will be delayed by [state the number of days]. This will result in the following late product deliveries, and the following added costs" [list the delays and costs]. Then make a suggestion, "If this writer is replaced with a competent writer immediately, we will be able to meet the project schedule with no significant extra costs." Then ask a simple question, "Please let me know what you would like to do by [name a date and time]."

### *The Terrified Junior*

**The background:** A very young employee on her first job had just completed her probationary period for the previous manager, who had given notice shortly after the young writer was hired. When the new manager arrived, the young writer questioned everything, constantly challenged the new manager, and loudly doubted her competence. This went on for a week, until it reached a crisis at a team meeting.

**The challenge:** To find out if the young writer really was competent, and if so, to get her cooperation and establish a good working relationship.

**What happened:** The new manager was at first so stunned by the behaviour, that she ignored it until things got worse. Finally, at the end of a team meeting the manager let the young writer say it all: loud complaints, criticisms, challenges, and ridicule. When she had finished, the manager clearly stated her own opinions and expectations, then dismissed the writer from the room. The manager did some research, some thinking, and called the writer into her office for a discussion, followed by re-building the young writer's desk and having some of her equipment changed to combat her increasing tendonitis.

Things improved. The critical incident was never repeated. The young writer stopped questioning the manager's authority, but continued to insist on discussing the reasons for every activity.

**The techniques:** At the end of the rant, the manager made sure the young writer had finished, then, instead of firing her, decided to get her attention, and try to find a way to work with her. The manager told the writer that twenty successful years in the business versus three months made the writer's criticisms moot. She forcefully stated which behaviours she would accept and which she would not, making it clear that she would listen to honest, polite, constructive criticism, but would not tolerate gratuitous nastiness, no matter what the problems of the critic. She then dismissed the writer from the room.

At this point, the new manager realized that her predecessor, other managers and employees, and all of the other writers in the department had met her before she joined the Company, but for some reason the young writer had not. The manager found from her predecessor's reports on the young writer, that she was brilliant, impatient, and having difficulty with some social skills. From her resumé, the new manager was able to assume that the writer had made very high marks in her studies, and that she might come from a background that demanded excellence and was intolerant of failure. She decided that although the young woman was a highly-competent writer, she was terrified of change in an industry that knows nothing but.

The manager then had a talk with the young writer, taking pains to get to know her and to let her know something of herself. She told the young writer what she perceived to be her strengths, and what she thought she should work on, offering to help her strengthen weaknesses, and giving concrete suggestions for working together. Then they went to look at the young writer's work area. The manager had the desk taken apart and put together differently, had the writer get a different keyboard and mouse, and showed the writer how to change her seating to improve her posture and her tendonitis.

The manager gained a great deal of credibility in the eyes of the young writer, and began to gain her trust. The manager then included her as much as possible in the strategic planning sessions with the other, much more senior writers, and gradually the young woman's attitude and social skills improved. The excellence of her writing was never in question.

## ***The Competent Team***

**The background:** A new manager arrived at short notice to take over management of a competent, hard-working team of writers who were under increasing pressures of various kinds. The new manager discovered that each writer had both an aging PC and an aging Macintosh with more than twenty aging software applications between the two computers to produce manuals, online help, release notes, project records and general correspondence. Each writer spent a lot of time in re-learning seldom-used tools and in re-writing and testing the accuracy of duplicated information. Senior management was regularly adding to the number of deliverables and not providing adequate resources nor extending the schedules.

**The challenge:** To decrease the pressures, improve working conditions, and still deliver projects to agreed-upon deadlines.

**What happened:** Over the first few weeks, the new manager spent a small amount of money and a good deal of effort to gain the support and confidence of her new team.

She improved lighting conditions at workstations, and upgraded some equipment and furniture. Then she got to know the writers, their perceptions of their work and their needs. She discovered that their stress was largely due to heavy documentation commitments with dependence on aging equipment and an amazingly large number of aging software applications to produce the documentation.

After doing some careful research and spending a little more money, she showed them how to dramatically simplify and streamline their equipment, their software, and the documentation process.

**The techniques:** At first, the new manager changed nothing.

She got to know the writers and their environment, their problems, successes, and sources of stress. She read all of the plans, schedules, reports, records, and correspondence she could find, and learned to use the Company products and documentation.

Then the manager took a long look at what each writer was doing, what equipment and software was being used, how much overtime was being expended and on what. By first getting to know the personalities and the background of each writer, the history of the department, and how to

use the products and their documentation, the new manager was able to pinpoint the simplest and most direct means of stress-reduction and process improvement. This took several weeks, while the writers kept on with the work scheduled by the previous manager.

When the manager decided how to improve the working conditions, she demonstrated both her knowledge of the products and documentation on which the writers were working, and a new process and tool. By demonstrating herself, the manager was able to first get the writers' attention, then their support. She demonstrated both the major benefits and the few drawbacks of the new process and tool, in comparison to their current situation. She quickly got the writers' commitment to making changes that were obviously in their own best interests, and their willing cooperation in starting to change.

They immediately began the move from a two-platform, multi-source, multi-application environment to a one-platform, single-source, three-application environment.

## THE TECHNIQUES

When taking over from another manager, use caution and the best interests of the employees and the corporation in making changes. Don't rush.

Demonstrate fairness and firmness from the start.

Do research and get to know your employees.

When making change, try always to simplify.

Trust your instincts. If your hair stands on end, or you even feel uneasy about a potential employee—find out why so that you can deal with it constructively.

### ***Getting cooperation:***

Go to bat immediately for something inexpensive but useful that the writers really need.

Get to know your immediate superior or supervisor right away, preferably before you accept the job.

Get to know your new employees as fast as possible, from resumés, reports, meetings, chats, lunches.

When you do start to make changes, get buy-in from the majority of your employees first. Do this by giving theory, reasons, and demonstrations, and providing enough time (but not too much) for discussion, questions, feedback, and for them to get used to the new ideas.

Find and use the strengths of your new employees. Find alternatives and if possible get them training to compensate for weaknesses.

Never listen to excuses, only to reasons, but first make it clear which is which. For example, an excuse is “the dog ate it” or “I had to go to the doctor”. A reason is something about which nothing could be done, such as “For three days the power was out all over the city”.

### ***Proving your point:***

Keep a log, a written track record with names, dates, times, places. Keep the log for every event, meeting, and phone call.

Get incompetent employees to prove their own failure. If they set their own goals, within the scope of the project, you can track hits and misses together, then show concrete proof of incompetence.

Always check references carefully with questions such as: “Would you hire this writer again?” “What would you avoid asking this writer to do?” “What are the three greatest strengths/weaknesses of this writer?” .

Test every new writer, preferably before employing, for ability to organize, write, and edit.

Provide written expectations for every project and every person. That is, provide plans and job descriptions that include purpose, scope and objectives.

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