

Dealing with extreme and difficult behaviour in the workplace

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Martin Smith advises on how to tackle a team member who is displaying extreme or difficult behaviour, which he has termed an EDB

There are many terms to describe an EDB or those people who display extreme or difficult behaviour in the workplace, including, functional psychopath, corporate narcissist, or those who exhibit counter productive workplace behaviours.

An EDB is a staff member who goes beyond the plain difficult or simply awkward. They are highly manipulative and very toxic to any organisation. They drain the life out of managers and staff at all levels of an organisation. Standard approaches to dealing with EDBs do not work for a number of reasons, these can include:

- Their unshakable belief that they are right and everyone else is wrong
- Their skill at manipulating multiple parties and influencing at the highest level of the organisation

- A powerful ability to mask issues or cloud them with other, often irrelevant points that wear down managers and / or staff to the point people just give in hoping for a “quiet life”
- An ongoing war of attrition with continued references to past issues or complaints and a policy of attack at every opportunity, shrouded as defense of their principles or work ethic

Having identified an EDB predator a number of truths must be accepted if any progress is going to be made to deal with them. These include:

- Whatever you do it will be wrong in the eyes of the EDB unless it is totally in line with their way of thinking and doing
- They will not suddenly change. There will often be a lull in their attacks but this simply adds to the pressure felt and the stress of knowing something will happen, with attempts to make sure it does not by walking on eggshells
- If challenged they will always attack – it is knowing this will happen and then being consistent and robust in your approach that will determine how things will pan out
- If you do nothing it is unlikely the problems will go away unless the EDB leaves (which is unlikely given they are on a mission to help the organisation)

The EDB has quite a distinct mentality which needs to be recognised for what it is and in a strange way accepted before positive action can be taken to manage them. It is vital to emphasise the term ‘manage’ should, in this instance be taken literally. Stop trying to change this person or hope they will change because in simple terms it will not happen.

Certain characteristic traits lead us to certain key action points which should be considered when dealing with an EDB, these include:

- Make statements rather than pose questions. Developing a firm ‘poker face’ to combat the inevitable emotional buttons the EDB will try to push in you.
- Reduction of justification – be clear in your own mind why you are taking the action you are and be ready to justify it objectively to others but justifying actions to the EDB simply gives them more ammunition to come back at you
- Avoid emotions on both sides – the EDB will bring emotions into the arena to get a reaction, it is vital that such reactions are not forthcoming. To do this you must have a clear and objective set of reasons what and why you are doing what you are doing, any doubt in your mind is a weakness to be exploited.

Dealing with an EDB is not easy but equally it is not impossible, even though it may seem like it.

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