

EBOOK

The manager's guide to difficult employees



If you're a manager, you need a plan for how to handle difficult employees.

Your first step is understanding what kind of employee you're dealing with. We've created a 2x2 matrix for identifying the four main employee types: Cultural Champions (high performing, high engagement), Grinders (high performing, low engagement), Silent Killers (low performing, high engagement), and Contaminators (low performing, low engagement).



Cultural Champions rarely cause any problems, but **Grinders**, **Silent Killers**, and **Contaminators** do. Use different strategies for each employee type for maximum effectiveness.

Talent optimized companies understand the importance of creating high-performing teams and maintaining a strong culture. Both are essential to achieving business goals. That's why you can't turn a blind eye to difficult employees. You must address the problem head-on.

What is engagement and why does it matter?

Engaged employees are emotionally committed to the company and its goals.

Maybe they're committed to the company's vision, to their direct manager, or to a big project they're working on—either way, engaged employees come to work because they want to.

Disengaged employees, on the other hand, come to work because they have to—they need to collect that paycheck. Your **Cultural Champions** and your **Silent Killers** are in the want to group, while your **Grinders** and your **Contaminators** are in the have to group.

Engaged employees go the extra mile.

Employees who come to work simply to collect a paycheck aren't intrinsically motivated to go above and beyond; they do the bare minimum to avoid getting fired.

Engaged employees volunteer often, work longer hours as needed, and remain solutions-oriented. According to Towers Perrin, engaged companies see 6% higher net profit margins; they also receive 5% higher shareholder returns across five years, Kenexa noted.

All this to say: When it comes to managing difficult employees, the majority of your efforts should be focused on improving engagement in your Grinders. They're already high-performing; just imagine what they could achieve if they were also highly engaged! Also, Grinders are working with one foot out the door and will jump on a decent offer from the company down the block. If you can get these high performers engaged, you might be able to retain them.

How to handle Grinders (high performance, low engagement)

Focus the majority of your attention here.

You need to understand what's causing disengagement in your Grinders. Come right out and ask them, "Is it me? Is it the culture? Is it your teammates? Is it your role? Are you not bought into the company vision?" Listen, gather feedback, and act quickly to fix whatever issues you uncover. For example, if you learn they're disengaged because they're forced to work alongside low performers, take action right away (see the next two pages for suggestions). Are you not tailoring your management style to their behavioral preferences? If the employee isn't extraverted and you're constantly dropping by their desk to chat, you could be the problem. Understand their individual preferences with a behavioral assessment and act accordingly.

Whatever you do, be sure your Grinders know how much you value their contributions and their high performance—and let them know you're actively trying to turn that disengagement around. Check in with them regularly and continue to gather feedback and make changes as needed.

Too many leaders think boosting engagement is as simple as handing out gift cards and erecting a ping pong table in the break room. And while some employees might appreciate these efforts, they are band-aids, not lasting fixes. As we learned in our annual [Employee Engagement Report](#), nine of the top 10 drivers of engagement and turnover intent map back to the organization (e.g., having trust in senior leadership, believing the organization has an outstanding future). Get to the root of the engagement problem and do something about it.

How to handle Silent Killers (low performance, high engagement)

Whatever you do, don't accept low performance.

When leaders let low performance slide, it affects high performers mentally and emotionally. While low performers might be well-liked socially, they demotivate their teammates—particularly those who get stuck picking up the slack. If you let Silent Killers get away with doing the bare minimum, it'll hurt your culture in the end. And it'll definitely damage your team dynamics.

The good news is, these employees are engaged. They likely believe in your mission, trust your senior leaders, and care about the company's success. Do what you can to help them be successful in their current role. Have you established clear KPIs and quantifiable performance metrics? At your next 1:1, do an exercise where you both write down the three main things they get paid to do, and three metrics they're judged on. Compare notes: Are you on the same page?

Some Silent Killers are just in the wrong seat. Have you administered a behavioral assessment and cross-referenced it with their current role to see if there's a mismatch between their natural drives and the job requirements? Is there an open role that might be a better fit? Could you create a role for this person to utilize their strengths? You can even have them name their own job.

If a role change isn't possible, Silent Killers can also benefit from being paired with a mentor.

How to handle Contaminators (low performance, low engagement)

Contaminators can turn your company into a toxic place if left unaddressed.

All companies have a few Contaminators—even the best companies. Top leaders address Contaminators' bad behavior before their negativity trickles down and affects other employees.

First, don't blame them. Own your responsibility in the matter, whether you hired a bad fit or failed to create a strong and motivating culture.

Second, don't make company decisions based on their feedback. Let's say your Contaminators are telling you you're moving too fast. Before you slam on the brakes, gather feedback from your Cultural Champions. If your high performing, highly engaged employees think the pace is just right, don't course correct just to appease your low performing, low engaged employees.

Third, don't expect to retain them. Your goal isn't zero turnover; it's healthy turnover. Don't be afraid of a drop in headcount.

Have an honest conversation. Tell your Contaminators what isn't working, and communicate what you did to contribute to the situation. By being transparent and sharing the blame, one of two things might happen: Either you manage to turn things around and they end up successful and happy, or you send them out as an advocate instead of an adversary.

Level up with these leadership survival strategies.

Being a great leader requires a growth mindset and getting comfortable with conflict. After all, difficult employees mean difficult conversations. To improve your leadership efficacy, check out our Leadership Survival Strategies e-book with tips from three-time CEO and former Olympic coach Mike Zani.

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