

# How to Handle People Problems

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Written by Steve Jones

In my topic entitled “Building a Foundation for Good Relations with Employees,” we discussed the importance of establishing strong and healthy relationships with employees to reduce “people problems.” This could be called “preventive medicine.” A daily dose of preventive medicine can go a long way towards avoiding frequent employee conflicts. Conflicts, however, will still inevitably occur, and then it’s time to use “reactive medicine,” reacting to something that occurred. The good news is that even reactive medicine, if administered correctly, can help develop a healthier employee.

There are four typical ways that problems will come to you:

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|----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1   Sizing things up | 3   Coming to you     |
| 2   Being tipped off | 4   Running into them |

Sizing things up can be accomplished by walking around the shop every day. Observe your employees. Are they productive and efficient? Do they have access to adequate and reliable tools? Do they have a satisfactory standard of conduct? Does the physical layout promote efficient and safe operations?

Sometimes people will tip you off about problems. Someone may come to you and say, “I think you need to know that this is taking place,” or “I think you need to know that we have a problem with this material, and nobody else wants to say anything.”

Problems can also come to you. A person might approach you and say, “I need a raise.” Or someone may say, “The working conditions are a little rough in my area.”

The fourth and probably toughest situation is when we don’t recognize or deal with a problem through the first three avenues, and a problem explodes. I call that running into them, like running into a brick wall. These are often tough problems that were ignored or missed through the first three avenues, and now the problem has escalated. By the time you run into it, your hands are full. The problem can no longer be ignored, so what should be done?

There are four steps that can be used to effectively tackle even the toughest problems. First of all, determine the objective. When you are done solving the problem, what do you want to have achieved? To successfully solve a problem, it is critical to first know what end results are desired. Until you have the outcome in view, you are not ready to start the problem solving method.

## Step One: Get the Facts

You can get the facts in numerous ways. One effective way is to review the employee’s record, which can be written or unwritten. I encourage even small companies to keep a file on each employee. There are many useful things that can go into this file; it is certainly not just a place to store negative things. For example, if an employee does something worthy of recognition, affirm them verbally, then record it in their file. This builds a history of the employee that can be quite valuable for performance evaluations or for solving critical problems.

Talk with the individuals involved in the issue, including the worker, foreman, and co-workers, if necessary. Get opinions and feelings. Some time ago I

was training a group of people and asked each trainee to present a problem, and then work through the process of solving the problem. One lady in the group shared a problem involving three women in a Girl Scout troop. When we got to the step of getting opinions and feelings, she admitted that she never took the step of asking for the opinions and feelings of the three women involved.

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To this day the problem has not been solved, and it likely never will be solved unless she is willing to honestly engage with the other ladies' opinions and feelings.

A word of caution about Step One: Be sure you have the complete story. Attempting to resolve a problem with one-sided "facts" or missing opinions and feelings from a key participant can result in the problem becoming even worse. The whole truth is needed to understand the problem.

### **Step Two: Weigh and Decide**

Now that you have the facts, it is time to weigh the facts and decide the appropriate course of action. This step reminds me of the brass statues on top of our post office that I observed in my growing up years. The one I remember most clearly was Lady Justice. Her eyes are blindfolded, and she is holding balance scales. The scales represent justice because you weigh and decide the facts. The facts need to fit together and reconcile. Consider listing all the facts on a whiteboard or piece of paper. Think about how they impact each other. Prioritize the facts.

Let's say, for example, that a person's performance has drastically slipped. That is a fact. You are reviewing the record, and you document that his performance dropped drastically. Another fact you discover is that the person has recently been diagnosed with cancer and is having related medical problems. Those facts fit together.

Make sure that the facts fit together, and that no major gaps exist. If the facts don't fit, or if you have gaps, then you don't have the whole story. In that case, you need to go back to Step One and start again.

After fitting the facts together and filling any gaps, ask yourself, "What possible actions can I take?" Make a list of potential responses and possible actions. Review each option and ask the question, "Does this possible action make sense, and is it remedial?" Consider whether your response fits with any written or unwritten policies for your business. If your response is consistent with your company policies, then it passes the first test. Also, consider whether your response is consistent with your overall objective for solving the problem, and whether it will positively affect the employees involved.

In some cases, you may want to come up with more than one option. I often encourage people to develop at least three possible options, and then select one or more of the best ones. One caution I have in working through Step Two is to avoid jumping to conclusions. It can be easy to jump to conclusions, especially for what we think are small problems. When we perceive a problem to be small, it's tempting to skip gathering the facts, considering how they impact each other, and looking for gaps. Going through each step, even for small problems, often creates a positive domino effect that uncovers cause and effect patterns that go deeper than the surface problem.

### **Step Three: Take Action**

After gathering the facts, weighing them, and deciding on a course of action, it is time to take action. Ask yourself, "Am I going to handle this myself? Do I have the authority? Do I have the capability?" For example, I was the supervisor of a production area with around 40 employees. We were working inside a building in the middle of July, and the weather was quite warm. One day, one of the employees came to me and said, "Steve, we have a problem." I asked her to explain. She said, "It's Mary. She stinks with body odor." I said, "What?" She repeated, "Steve, she stinks and we are gagging. It is really bad. We are gagging over on the production line, Steve. You've got to do something. We can't handle it anymore."

Mary was a very nice person, but was severely obese, and they wanted me to do something about the way she smelled. Can you imagine what it was like for me, thinking I have to go tell this woman, “Your co-workers are complaining that you stink with body odor, and they are gagging?” There was no way I could do that. So, I did what any young Amish man would do—I called Human Resources. I said, “I have a problem here. The workers are complaining about Mary. She stinks. They are gagging. I went to check, and they are right. She stinks and I almost gagged. Help!”

The Vice President of HR asked me to come to his office. He asked me, “This is the first time you have ever had this type of problem, right?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “You know, you production people are all alike. When there is something good, you want to pat somebody on the back, and you want to do it. But when there’s something bad, HR is supposed to do it. I’m going to show you how to handle it today, and then the next time you have someone with body odor like that, you are going to take care of it.” “That’s fair enough,” I said. “Now,” he said, “I’m going to tell you what she is going to say. I’m going to explain the situation to her, and the first thing that is going to come out of her mouth is, ‘Why, I bathe every day!’”

I left his office and went to get Mary. We met with the VP in the conference room. He started by saying, “Mary, we have a concern that we need to share with you. You are a very good worker...” He started the conversation with positive information about how she is a valued worker. He continued with, “However, we have a slight problem. Your co-workers are complaining about your body odor.” Mary’s response was, “Why, I bathe every day!” I thought, “Hmmm.” He said, “Well, I thought you would want to know this.” Mary did want to know this, and she was very concerned about it. He went on to give her some suggestions about bathing, using a stronger deodorant, powder, things like that.

The problem was solved, until a month or two later the employees came to me and said, “Steve, she stinks again.” I knew I had no choice but to call her aside and say, “Mary, uh, a couple of the gals mentioned that, you know, they’ve noticed that you’re starting with a body

odor again, and I knew you’d want to know.” By this time I was comfortable talking with her, because I truly valued her as a worker. She said, “Thank you for telling me,” and I never had a problem with her again. She took the precautions and she really appreciated me mentioning it to her, because she was the type of person who didn’t want to offend anyone. I’ve learned that if a problem is handled correctly, people tend to be very cooperative.

You may find yourself in a situation like I did, where I needed someone to help me solve the problem. The person to help you may be either in a position above

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you or below you. If you are a manager, sometimes the owner needs to handle a situation. If you are a manager or owner, sometimes it can be delegated to a supervisor or foreman. Make sure the right person addresses the problem. Whatever you do, *don’t pass the buck*. Unpleasant as the task may seem, if it is your responsibility, you do it. It’s the right thing to do. If it is part of your responsibility, then you owe it to the people you work for, or who work for you. Taking responsibility even in unpleasant situations will earn you respect, while dodging responsibility will make you appear like a wimp or someone who doesn’t care.

Some situations can be very emotionally charged, particularly if the people involved are mad, upset, or hurting. Sometimes they need time to cool off. You, as the problem-solver, need to take time to gather your wits and calm down. Never rush into an emotionally charged situation without considering the feelings of the people involved. I observed a situation where some employees were very upset. The manager chose to take action before he should have, and it exploded in his face. As a result, he was never liked, and he lost his employees’ respect.

## Step Four: Check the Results

It is important to follow up the first three steps with an evaluation of the outcome. In my experience, this is the most challenging of the four steps. People often think they have dealt with the problem, but fail to follow up with an evaluation of whether their solution succeeded. The company I work for uses an acronym PDCA, which stands for Plan, Do, Check, Act. It's part of our "lean manufacturing" policy. If you have a problem that has been addressed, then it needs to be followed up. After solving a problem, ask yourself "How soon will I follow up?" How soon you follow up and how many times follow up is required depends on the nature of the situation. The bigger the problem, the more likely that extra follow up work will be required.

Part of follow up is watching for changes in output, attitudes, and relationships. Increasing production is a good sign that the problem has been solved. Also watch for positive body language, smiles, eye contact, etc. (or the opposite) as indicators of whether the problem has been truly resolved. It is important that working relationships are healthy and meaningful. If relationships remain strained, then you may need to address the problem again by starting over at Step One. A crucial part of follow up is to review the objective you set prior to beginning the process. Has it been accomplished? Was the outcome positive?

Now that we've reviewed the four steps in the problem-solving process, I'd like to give you a couple of tips. I encourage you to keep notes the first time you use this process. When you identify a problem, write down the objective you would like to accomplish. Write down the facts as you gather them. Talk to each of the individuals involved and make notes of their responses.

Another thing I'd like to emphasize is to not rely on hearsay. If Suzie heard Bart say something, don't rely on Suzie's version of what Bart said. Instead, talk to Bart directly. Relying on hearsay can often result in poor decisions, because the facts were skewed.

Be sure to get opinions and feelings from everyone. Find out what they are thinking and how they are feeling. Do they think someone was mistreated? Do they think

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someone is making a mountain out of a molehill? Talking to everyone involved will help you ensure you get the complete story. Once you have the full story, you can effectively weigh the facts and make a good decision.

Before taking action, make sure the action is consistent with the practices and policies of the organization. Many companies are not large enough to have a Human Resources department to consult, and that's okay. If you are a manager, check with the owner if you have any doubt about your proposed course of action. If you don't have anyone in the company to consult with, consider checking with an expert outside the company, such as a business advisor. HR is a highly-regulated and somewhat complex area of business, and it is important to be sure that your problem-solving steps do not violate any state or federal law.

Now that we've learned the four-step problem-solving process, let's work through a real-life example. Following is a conversation I had with a volunteer during a live problem-solving exercise. We'll call the volunteer Ben.

**Steve:** What's the problem, Ben?

**Ben:** I have a crew, and information is coming back to me, the owner, that all is not well. It's coming through my son who goes with the crew, and I'm not out there. What's the best way to handle that?

**Steve:** What is your objective? What would you like to happen once you've got this all settled?

**Ben:** I want this individual to perform to his fullest potential.

**Steve:** Jot that down. That's your objective. The first step is to get the facts. So, Ben, give me the facts as you know them.

**Ben:** One of the workers on the crew is cheating a little bit on his time card. He's also spending too much time on the phone and is slacking off.

**Steve:** After the facts are gathered, the next thing

to do is to consider the rules and customs. Ben, do you have rules or customs about not slacking off, spending too much time on the cell phone, or cheating on the time card? It may not be written, but it can still be a custom or rule. So, in your company the custom is that you don't cheat on your time card, spend too much time on the phone, and you don't slack off. You pull your share of the load. The next action is talking to the individuals concerned. Ben, have you talked to the individuals concerned? No? You are going to? Good.

Step Three is to take action, and Step Four is to check the results. However, we can't move ahead to those steps until Step One (talking to the individuals) is complete. If you need to talk to someone about something unpleasant, remember this principle: you praise in public; you discipline in private. In this case, talk to the individual somewhere private, and start and end with something positive about him (sandwich approach). Consider using words such as: "I have a concern, because I am hearing that (this, this, or this) is happening, and that really, while we don't have a written policy, it's not our custom in our business to do that. I need your help in getting this taken care of. Could you share with me why you're spending extra time on the phone? And I'm hearing that there may be some discrepancies on your time sheet. Are you aware of that? Do you have any reason why you think others may be getting that impression?" Use words and questions that lead them into positive conversation. Coach them on what you need from them, and avoid making direct accusations.

**Steve:** Now Ben, let's say you had this conversation with that individual. Let's say that the worker said, "Nope. I have never cheated on my time card. I only talk on my cell phone during break and lunch. And man, I am sweating like you wouldn't believe. I'm

pulling my share of the load." That's his opinion. In his mind he hasn't cheated, abused the phone policy, or been lazy. How should you respond?

**Ben:** Ask the other worker's for their opinions?

**Steve:** Yes, talk to the other individuals to make sure you are getting the full story. If they confirm the original concern, you can come back to the individual and say, "I'm sorry, but three of the guys on the crew say that they've seen you on more than one occasion on your cell phone when you should have been working, and you're not pulling your share of the load." If you have solid evidence that he is cheating on the time sheet, using the phone too much, being lazy, etc., then tell him.

I heard of a problem similar to this, which comes from the corn chip company Frito Lay. They were having a problem with disgruntled workers, who were taking fine-tipped markers and writing swear words on corn chips and putting them in the bags. This was causing major problems because their customers were opening bags and finding corn chips with swear words written on them. The company decided to start a new corrective action program.

If they had an employee whose performance was substandard, such as writing swear words on corn chips, they would call them into the office and have what they called a coaching session. They would say something like, "Joe, I want to share something with you. We are having a problem here, and I'm concerned." They would state the problem and say, "Do you have anything to share with me?" Joe might or might not share anything. The management would say, "No, you don't have to sign anything, Joe. Go back to work. Thanks a bunch. Have a nice day." Then after Joe left, they would document the conversation. The next day when Joe came into work they would say, "Hey Joe, do you have a minute? Do you remember our conversation yesterday? I just tried to put it into words. Can you please read this and tell me if there is anything I missed or that is incorrect? No? OK. No, you don't need to sign it. Thanks a bunch." Then they'd put the written conversation into Joe's file.

Two weeks later, if Joe had the same problem, they'd

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ask him into the office, sit him down, and say, “Joe, do you remember our conversation two weeks ago where I talked to you about your failure to (whatever the issue was)? Joe, you were just seen doing it again. I have no other choice but to give you a verbal written warning. I’m documenting that I’m talking to you, and I need you to sign this, acknowledging that I’ve made you aware of it.” This acknowledgment would then go in Joe’s file. If it happened again, Joe would get a written warning. In the company I work for, that is considered their final notice. If it happens again within one year, the employee is terminated. However, Frito Lay did something very interesting. After the final written warning, if Joe messed up again, they would call him into the office and say, “Joe, we’ve had this conversation three times now, and seemingly you have not changed your (attitude, performance, etc.). This is what I’m going to do: I’m going to send you home now, and I’m going to pay you for today. You go home, and you are paid. While you are at home, you need to think about whether you want to continue your employment with us. If you do, you need to write an action

plan and tell us what you’re going to do to change your performance and/or behavior. We’ll see you tomorrow at 7:00 AM.” They would then send the person home and compensate them for the rest of the day.

It’s interesting—when you send a person home with that message, it really makes him think. Many times when I have done that, the employee came in the next morning and said, “I want another chance. Here’s my plan for improvement. If it needs any changes, just let me know. I want to work for you.”

Of course, some people will say, “Nah, forget it,” and you’ll never see them again. You’re better off without those people. This method really works. I’ve seen it turn people around.

I hope that you can learn to practice preventive medicine, building good relationships for a good foundation, so that you won’t run into frequent people problems. However, if and when problems arise, just follow this four-step method. It’s been thoroughly tested and proven effective.

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