

THE EXECUTIVE  
ROUNDTABLE®  
Great leaders make the difference



*What do you do when one of your best people creates bad feelings within your team?*

*Glain Roberts-McCabe sat down with Roundtable member and past Alumni Committee Chair, **Shana McEachren**, Managing Partner at Fifth P, who shares her advice on what to do when a top performer is a problem.*

## MENTORING MATTERS

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*“I have a key performer on my team who delivers great results but who can be rude and abrasive to colleagues. I’ve spoken to them on several occasions about their behaviour but it never changes. What should I do? Their results are great but I’m worried about the impact of their approach internally.”*

This is always a challenging situation, and one that organizations don't usually make easy for leaders to navigate, as many continue to reward employees for achieving results giving little or no recognition to how those results were achieved.

When you have an employee who is a great performer but is not a great fit on your team, there are a number of things to consider. First, what impact does this individual have on overall company and team performance? While a key performer may be delivering results, if that individual's performance is coming at the expense of other employees, you may need to re-evaluate their overall

### *Leadership Tip*

*Assess the impact your top performer is having on the rest of your team and your image—are they really the star they appear to be?*

contribution. The key performer may also be having a negative impact on the abilities of the other team members, preventing them from making their best contributions.

Second, you need to consider what messages you are sending to your team and other people inside (and possibly) outside the organization. Does this key player represent your company culture, what your brand stands for and the behaviours you want employees to demonstrate toward customers and each other? By keeping this individual on your team and tolerating the abrasive behaviour, you are sending subtle, or perhaps not-so-subtle, messages to the rest of the team, your colleagues and leaders that this behaviour is acceptable to you and to the organization.

Third, have you considered the cause of the abrasive behaviour? Are there events and situations in this employee's life outside

of work that may be causing the behaviour? Are there events or conditions at work that are causing the employee to be abrasive? If you can determine the cause of the behaviour, you can then determine if the behaviour can be changed.

Finally, do you feel this individual is willing and able to change?

Or do you believe this behaviour might be an inherent part of the individual's personality? I like to think the best of people and I believe

everyone is capable of change. As a leader, you want to do everything you can to set people up for success and help them become the best performer they can be. However, it is also impossible to help

someone who is not interested in changing. It is also very difficult to change someone's personality or attitude. As the old adage goes, "Hire for attitude, train for skill."

You have likely already considered at least some of these factors and questions and that is what motivated you to initially speak with this individual about their behaviour on more than one occasion. Now, it's time to have a deeper conversation with this individual. In particular, I encourage you to spend time discussing and exploring the cause of the behaviour and the individual's interest and willingness to change the behaviour.

### Leadership Tip

*Inaction sends just as loud a message as action. Tolerating bad behavior tells the rest of your team that the problem person is acting in a permissible and perhaps even desirable manner.*

### Leadership Tip

*Adopt a sympathetic perspective to get to the bottom of what is contributing to the rude attitude.*

To have a meaningful conversation, it will be important to create an environment of trust. Consider when and where to have this discussion. Depending on your relationship with this individual, you may have a more open conversation if you leave the office and go out for coffee or maybe this person prefers to meet in a private meeting room in the office. Also, consider the best time of day to have the discussion and try to schedule a time when neither of you will feel rushed or overly distracted by other priorities.

### Leadership Tip

*Set aside a quiet time to meet with the employee, in a location where you won't be distracted by competing priorities.*

Start the conversation on a positive note, reinforcing the contributions the individual makes to the team and the organization. Remind the

individual about your previous discussions regarding the abrasive behaviour. Be sure to take a few minutes to reinforce the impact you feel this has on other employees (and customers).

Then ask the individual how she/he feels things have been going since your last conversation. This is a great way to assess the individual's awareness of the behaviour and the lack of change that you have seen. It will also give you a chance to assess how the individual is feeling about the behavior overall. He/she may brush things off and quickly say it's going much better. Or he/she might share the disappointment and frustration that he/she hasn't been able to make an improvement yet.

The individual's response will give you clues as to their interest and willingness to change. Don't be afraid to ask direct questions. Find out how much they are enjoying their role. Ask if they want support to eliminate the abrasive behaviour.

This is also a great time to dive deeper. Reassure him/her that you want to help and then explore possible causes behind the behaviour using some of the questions outlined above. Then as a leader, you can determine if this is something that can be changed by the individual, with or without your support. Perhaps you'll uncover a team dynamic that is contributing to the behaviour. Or maybe there is something you are doing as a leader that is encouraging or contributing to the abrasive behaviour. If there are events or situations beyond your control that are having a negative impact on the employee, this might be a great time to help the individual access benefits and resources available through your employee assistance program (EAP).

### **Leadership Tip**

***Watch for remorse and eagerness for feedback—this will tell you whether your team member is still engaged and willing to change in order to help the team.***

While there may be things you can do to help, you ultimately need to determine if this employee is ready to change and capable of changing. Be prepared to discover that your top performer doesn't feel they need to change. He/she may disagree with you about what is considered abrasive behaviour. He/she may feel that the behaviour is just "part of getting things done." In this case, the individual is unlikely to change and my recommendation would be to part ways. Remember, it's ok, in fact sometimes it's often more than ok, to let a top performer go. This individual may be better suited to another organization and your team's overall performance will likely improve without this disruptive behaviour.

Remember that tolerating poor behaviour in exchange for results sends messages about you and your organization. What messages do you want to send about what's important to you and the organization and what behaviours are acceptable? **RL**

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**Shana McEachren** has over 15 years of experience consulting with clients on customer experience and the human interactions that drive organizational transformation and business results. She has led and contributed to customer and employee experience projects involving creating brand purpose statements, experience mapping and design, and has led client working teams to facilitate change management processes. Shana is also an expert facilitator and plays a key role in activating and engaging employees across all organizational levels.



**Glain Roberts-McCabe** is passionate about the art of leadership and supporting ambitious mid-career leaders. She created **The Executive Roundtable** to provide emerging leaders with the navigational skills, tools and savvy needed to manage increases in scope, pressure and leadership complexity.