



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

*Glain Roberts-McCabe sat down with Roundtable member **Sandy Lee**, member of the senior leader team at Reddin Global Inc., 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 an issue that can plague new and experienced managers. We've all heard the descriptors, "they're like a bull in a china shop," "collateral damage," "they'll eat you alive." And yet, these employees can also lay claim to the strongest job outputs and KPIs like financial results, best marketing strategies, or even the strongest administrators.

The first place to start when you notice someone is behaving "abrasively" with their co-workers is an honest conversation.

When I first started in my career in HR and was giving guidance

to new and experienced managers on employment issues, I spent a lot of time assisting with tone and language that was diplomatic, compromising, and conflict-resolution oriented. Diplomacy is not a bad thing, however,

### Leadership Tip

*Too much "cushioning" language can bury your point. Focus on being a straight shooter.*

sometimes the true message you're trying to deliver can get lost. I've learned since then to encourage managers to develop and find their authentic voice in delivering these messages, and that more often than not, just laying things out on the table in plain language is an excellent option.

Beyond the open and honest dialogue, here are a few helpful tips to encourage and impact change.

#### **1. What gets measured gets done.**

There's clearly no problem with key performers achieving their outputs—that's often why they've been identified as a key performer in the first place. So when you're measuring results with your high performers, it's important to separate what gets done from how it gets done: the action plan to achieve the person's role

and responsibilities. We often spend so much time focused on the end results that we forget to indicate how we want the person to get there. A focus on team and stakeholder relationships with clear measurements and expectations may provide motivation for someone to change their tune. Let them know they need to obtain buy-in from two to three stakeholders

internally on a project or idea, or that in order to achieve a sales target they need to work collaboratively with these two key employees in the organization. And then hold them accountable by measuring their success in those areas—regular check-ins utilizing both outputs and action plans to achieve them are important.

## **2. Define authenticity.**

Employees, especially high performing ones, hate being told to “dim their lights.” It makes them feel like they can’t bring their whole selves to work. Most organizations have a list of core values that (hopefully) are embedded in the organizational culture. Conduct a

deep dive with the employee to identify their top ten core values and what they mean to them personally and professionally. Is there misalignment with the organizational or even departmental cultural values? Have a personal and

open dialogue about where you feel values aren’t being honoured (teamwork, collaboration) and perhaps where the employee feels they aren’t able to honour their core values. Creating a space for this

### **Leadership Tip**

***Make sure behavioral results are measurable so your team members can track their improvement.***

### **Leadership Tip**

***Reframe the conversation to be about values, allowing for a less personal discussion of their problem behavior.***

conversation can shift the perspective, allowing the employee to feel whole and to have a discussion in a much more personal (but still professional!) way.

### **3. Perception is (a form of) truth.**

Every single interaction we have with another human being leaves them with an impression of us. Tone, words, body language—over time these are the guiding images that form their beliefs about how we will engage with them in the future. The whole “past performance is a good indicator of future performance” thing creates a lasting impression on those around you, however, this impression can be changed. The story that “Jane is a nightmare to deal with, she bulldozes, only cares about her own ideas” may not be who Jane actually is, nor how she perceives herself. If she doesn’t believe it, finding opportunities to demonstrate her true self can be helpful.

A (non-punitive) multi-rater tool or “Stop, Start, Continue” tool that allows others to provide their impressions of where Jane is less and more

effective in her interactions and in various situations can help shed a light that’s not coming directly from her manager’s mouth. This is a tool that can help Jane change not only her behaviours, but also her story.

The opportunity to influence one’s individual reputation can be a powerful motivator to instigate change and improvement. A colleague recently pointed me to a *Forbes* article, which defines some key reputation-killing behaviours. Finding a way to

#### **Leadership Tip**

***Create a constructive space for employees to share their perspectives with their team members. Give them the opportunity to re-shape their reputation.***

communicate this to the individual and being really clear about what those behaviours are (honesty is the best policy!) and the impact they are having can go a long way. I love one of the tips in the article, encouraging an employee to ask the question, “How can I be a better teammate to you?” Being vulnerable and putting it out there to build self-awareness is a growth opportunity in and of itself. It also allows for empathy building—understanding the impact one’s behaviour has on another individual can be tremendous in allowing both employees to express themselves and learn from each other and create connection. Baseline, it provides clarity on what impression is being held by this person’s peers.

#### **4. Invest.**

High performer? Check. Demonstrates leadership potential? Check. Behaves as a role model for other employees? NOPE. Two out of these three markers of a future leader are pretty important and this could be an opportunity to make some resource decisions on whether you want to invest in this individual to help support them change their behavior. Are there resources available to commit to the employee to help them along? Leadership Coaching, for example, is becoming increasingly common across the private and public sectors with the realization that external influence and championing can help motivate the results you want to see.

Training is another initiative to investigate. One of the reasons someone may be knocking heads with other staff is because of a lack of flexibility in their ability to influence. Often people have a default method in how they approach others—sometimes it’s logic based, sometimes relationship based, sometimes bulldozer based. It takes time to build the skill of learning how best to bend and flex that style in a way that really speaks to others. Sometimes, investing in training to enable growth in particular behavior-based skills (like influence) can have the effect of both changing how this person interacts with others and demonstrates your willingness to

set them up for success. It's a push in the direction of having them speak a common language with their co-workers.

### **5. Role fit**

Sometimes, as managers, we also have to ask: Is this the right job for the employee? That's not always easy if the person is delivering great results for the manager, but an important question if this person indeed has potential in the organization. What makes this person a key performer? If they changed roles in the organization would they still be as effective but get along better with their colleagues? Some essential questions to ask: What are this employee's strengths? What are weaknesses/challenges/opportunities? This is *not* about moving a problem employee from one manager to another. This is about determining if there is an alternative way to set an employee up for success in the organization by removing any barriers or obstacles in the way (which will also mean they have to do some of the heavy lifting to make changes to their behavior as well).

### **6. Parting ways**

Last but not least is whether this is the right organization for the employee. As a manager, if you've used up everything in your toolkit (and this toolkit) to turn someone around, then this may not be the right role or organization for them. We always think of exiting employees as a challenging endeavor, and it can be difficult to say goodbye to someone who you've worked with for a long time. Make sure you recognize their contribution to the organization, and support them as they transition onto their next opportunity.

As you may have gathered by now, my philosophy is to give employees the benefit of the doubt. It's rare that someone is intentionally out to aggravate or even sabotage their co-workers. Style clashes are real however and so is their impact.

As managers, we all have a responsibility to advocate and champion our staff while also contributing to an overall productive (and hopefully harmonious) working environment and organizational culture. Finding the balance in that when you have an employee who gets results but who is not trusted by their peers is difficult. Supporting the person to help them change the story and conversation demonstrates exceptional managerial skills—and these are the kinds of situations where you really need to flex those muscles. Know this—change is possible. **RL**



**Sandy Lee** is currently a member of the senior leader team at Reddin Global Inc. who's product is The Emerson Suite, a mobile management toolkit with a proven coaching methodology that is revolutionizing the way coaches engage with and deliver value to their clients. They train and certify Effectiveness Coaches to use their methodologies and tools with their clients so they can grow their businesses, and create more effective leader-managers.



She is the former Director, Staff & Volunteer Resources with the Toronto International Film Festival Inc. (TIFF). Her HR career has focused on providing strategic support in the areas of resource planning, performance management, compensation and professional development. She has also been a talent development coach engaging with high potential leaders.

Sandy holds a Bachelor's degree in Psychology from the University of Delaware. She has volunteered her time and expertise with both the HR Council and Work In Culture to create Human Resources reference tools for other not for profit organizations. Sandy is also a current member of the Executive Committee of the Work In Culture Board of Directors, where she provides guidance on building human resources business skills for the arts and culture sector.



**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.