

A photograph of two women in an office environment. The woman on the left, with dark curly hair, is looking towards the right. The woman on the right, with long dark hair, is whispering to someone off-camera, with her hand near her mouth. A semi-transparent grey banner with white text is overlaid across the middle of the image.

# Strategies for Handling Manipulative Employees

**LORMAN<sup>®</sup>**

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Whether a business has only three employees or a staff of 300, if even one of them is manipulative, productivity suffers. Dealing with problems as soon as they become apparent is the best solution because ignoring them will not make them go away. It is important to learn to recognize manipulative behavior and stop it before it causes irreparable damage.

### **Consequences of Manipulative Behavior**

Other employees are dissatisfied and tense when co-workers are manipulative, and unhappy people do not perform as well as they should when they work in stressful atmospheres. There may be an increase in the use of sick time and disabilities related to stress as well. If manipulators are aggressive enough, some employees may quit their jobs to seek employment in more pleasant environments. Training new employees to replace them is time-consuming and costly. Furthermore, when new workers start dealing with the manipulative people, the process may begin again.

### **Signs of Manipulation**

You must understand manipulators and their motives and methods before you can deal with them effectively. Some people may seem to be aggressive when they are simply assertive. Fair, constructive competition may appear to be destructive rivalry. If employees use proper restraint and have consideration for others' rights,

they may not be manipulators. It is essential to know the difference between manipulation and assertiveness. In addition, people who lie and manipulate often will not maintain eye contact with you, but other people may be uncomfortable maintaining eye contact because they are timid or lack confidence in themselves.

Observe the behavior of co-workers when they are together. Victims may not report abuse because they are afraid of retaliation, but the signs are often obvious if you are alert to them.

Employees often reveal their problem behaviors at staff meetings. Manipulators frequently attempt to monopolize meetings, blame others, use implications and other methods to improve their status by making others look bad. Deal with them effectively by interrupting them when they display those actions. Turn the conversations to other matters, and do not let the troublemakers continue with their complaints.

### **Overt Manipulation**

The behavior of openly aggressive manipulators may consist of threats, intimidation, raised voices and other antagonistic actions. Their overt conduct makes them easy to recognize because they do not hide their exploits.

## **Covert Manipulation**

However, secretly aggressive manipulators' actions are usually subtle, and their intentions are more difficult to distinguish. Typically selfish and jealous of others' achievements, they seek to belittle them. They look for weakness in others and take advantage of that quality to use it against them. Using humor unsuitably to degrade others or their suggestions, attempting to create feelings of guilt in others and spreading malicious gossip are some of their tactics. Their behavior may involve denial of problems while trying to disgrace others. If they admit that there are problems, they try to make major issues seem minor.

Covert manipulators frequently appear to be charming to superiors and may seem to be supportive of co-workers even as they are revealing their mistakes or criticizing them. Using flattery and helpfulness, they try to get others to trust them. Because of the subtlety of their actions, even their victims may not be aware of their hidden agendas at first. If their victims try to resolve the problems, the manipulators are often able to turn matters around so the victims feel sorry for them and even apologize for challenging them. The manipulators want others to believe they are misunderstood, and they seek sympathy so people will not want to hurt their feelings.

Manipulators frequently make excuses to justify their actions, and those excuses can be very convincing. They attempt to make others believe they are only defending themselves because people are unfairly accusing them, and they blame others for their own shortcomings. By changing the subject, they attempt to distract others from the real issues.

Manipulative behavior can include leaving out details that incriminate them or deliberately lying to promote themselves at the expense of others. Intimidating others with hints or implied threats and devising ways to make others feel inefficient, unintelligent or inadequate are some of their ploys.

Some people who appear to have good intentions and display attitudes of helpfulness and loyalty can really be hiding their true motives. They may try to make co-workers look self-centered, uncooperative and incompetent and may manipulate others into doing their jobs for them. Sometimes, manipulators' schemes cause others to lose their jobs. Their covert actions can be more damaging than the actions of obviously manipulative people may be.

Knowing some of the tricks manipulators use and how they operate will help you to spot them.

## **Reasons for Manipulation**

Manipulators typically behave in that manner because they want more power and control or want to have their own way. They like to dominate conversations, and their behavior makes them feel important and powerful. Many manipulators have attitudes of self-righteousness and arrogance or an exaggerated sense of their own importance.

However, do not waste too much time trying to discover legitimate reasons for the manipulators' actions. Instead, judge their behavior, focus on asserting your authority and put a stop to the unacceptable conduct.

## **Dealing with Manipulation Problems**

It is crucial to act quickly when you become aware of problems. If you discover that some employees are showing signs of manipulative behavior, document the details of each circumstance. Arrange for meetings with the troublemakers if manipulation problems become serious, and maintain a calm, professional attitude. When appropriate, ask a third person to witness your meetings as a safeguard for you. Be aware of labor laws, and use care not to violate employees' rights to ensure that they cannot make accusations against you.

## **Meeting with Manipulative Employees**

There may be outside circumstances of which you are unaware that contribute to the aggressive behavior of manipulators. For example, they may attempt to excuse some of their poor performance by shifting the blame to others. If they have trouble focusing on their work, they may blame co-workers for distracting them. Calmly discuss the situations and issues with those involved, and remain neutral while attempting to learn the reasons behind their manipulative behavior. Discuss with them some possible solutions to the problems, and if they believe they have your support and understanding, the situations may improve.

Try to make the employees feel at ease and treat them respectfully, but do not allow them to manipulate you or play on your sympathy. If the manipulators are tearful, hand them tissues, but do not comment. If they raise their voices, calmly wait for them to stop, and then proceed with a low voice. That will force them to be quiet in order to hear what you say. If they display anger, do not respond with anger.

Hold manipulators accountable for any rumors they start and put a stop to them. Ask for specific details about their accusations and require them to provide proof. Focus on the current problems without referring to previous issues, and use facts when confronting them. Be specific about the conduct you are asking

them to stop, and do not accept excuses or explanations. Insist on receiving direct answers. If their answers are vague, they may be trying to avoid the issues and attempting to manipulate you. Determine their opinions about the reasons for the problems. Listen attentively to their responses and show support for their concerns. If appropriate, offer advice about getting help with any personal problems they may have without making inferences or asking personal questions.

Give the employees opportunities to voice specific complaints, but do not accept general terms like no one, everyone, never and always. Explain that you need to know definite details in order to address the problems. Ask them how they intend to solve the problems, and assist them in making reasonable plans for remedies. Help them create written statements of the details involved in the issues along with descriptions of their plans for correcting the problems and agreements to carry out those plans. The statements should explain the consequences of not abiding by the terms of the agreements and include deadlines for meeting them. Make sure the agreements are reasonable and enforceable. Follow up with meetings after the deadlines to evaluate the situations, and reward them for meeting the goals or impose the penalties specified in the statements if they fail.

## **Prevention**

Provide conflict resolution and communication training for supervisors, and hold them responsible for employee morale. Make clear rules with definite boundaries to protect the rest of your staff from manipulators. Create a written policy that describes the type of behavior you will not tolerate. Ask current and new employees to sign a statement at the bottom of the policy stating that they understand it and agree to comply with it.

Encourage employees to respect others, and do not reward manipulators by recognizing their achievements or promoting them if they harmed others to gain their successes. Praise those who use fairness and teamwork and perform their duties in a responsible manner. Develop good relations with employees by showing them that they can trust you to be fair with them. Be a positive role model, and treat employees with respect and consideration. However, if some employees do not treat their co-workers in that manner, be assertive and firm with them.

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