

Scenario: The "Difficult" Employee

What Was Happening

Sarah has been a high-performing employee for three years. Over the last two months, her supervisor notices:

- Increased absenteeism
- Missed deadlines
- Short, defensive responses to feedback
- Withdrawal from team meetings
- Emotional reactions when discussing performance concerns

Several coworkers have commented that Sarah seems "checked out" and "hard to work with."

The supervisor schedules a meeting to address the performance concerns.

Traditional Leadership Perspective

What We May Expect as Supervisors

A supervisor may assume:

- The employee is becoming disengaged.
- The employee no longer cares about their work.
- The employee is being unprofessional.
- The employee needs to be held accountable immediately.
- The employee is choosing not to communicate.

Typical Response

The supervisor says:

"Your performance has declined significantly. You need to improve your attendance, meet deadlines, and participate more in meetings. If things don't improve, we'll need to discuss corrective action."

Likely Outcome

- Employee feels judged and misunderstood.
 - Trust decreases.
 - Employee becomes more guarded.
 - Performance may continue to decline.
 - Increased risk of turnover, disciplinary action, or burnout.
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Trauma-Informed Leadership Perspective

Shift the Question

Instead of asking:

"What's wrong with this employee?"

Ask:

"What might be happening to this employee?"

The supervisor learns that Sarah is caring for a parent recently diagnosed with a serious illness. She is experiencing significant stress, sleep disruption, and anxiety but has been reluctant to discuss it because she fears being viewed as unreliable.

Trauma-Informed Response

The supervisor says:

"I've noticed some changes in attendance and work performance, and I wanted to check in. My goal is to understand what's getting in the way and see how we can support your success while still meeting our responsibilities."

The supervisor:

- Listens without judgment.
- Focuses on psychological safety.
- Maintains accountability expectations.
- Explores available supports.
- Discusses temporary accommodations or flexibility if appropriate.
- Connects the employee with EAP resources and organizational supports.

Key Trauma-Informed Principles Demonstrated

- ☒ Safety
 - ☒ Trustworthiness
 - ☒ Collaboration
 - ☒ Empowerment
 - ☒ Peer and organizational support
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Expected Outcome

The employee:

- Feels respected and heard.
- Is more willing to communicate challenges.
- Works collaboratively on a performance improvement plan.
- Utilizes available support resources.
- Re-engages with work responsibilities.

The supervisor:

- Maintains accountability standards.
 - Builds trust and retention.
 - Models supportive leadership.
 - Achieves better long-term performance outcomes.
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Training Debrief Question

Traditional Leadership asks:

"Why isn't Sarah doing her job?"

Trauma-Informed Leadership asks:

"What barriers may be affecting Sarah's ability to do her job, and how can we support success while maintaining expectations?"

Key Takeaway

Trauma-informed leadership does not lower standards. It changes how leaders understand behavior and respond to challenges. Accountability remains, but it is paired with empathy, curiosity, and support.

This example tends to resonate strongly with HR professionals because it demonstrates that trauma-informed leadership is not about excusing poor performance. It is about improving outcomes by understanding the person behind the behavior.