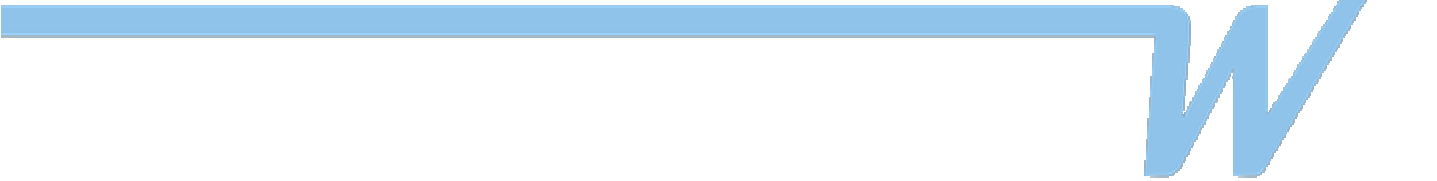




Insights on Employees Performing Poorly on Purpose



Details

Several years ago, researchers, Becker and Martin, conducted groundbreaking research that validated what many people already suspected. More research followed which continued to verify the initial findings.

Key Findings: People manage their impressions at work. Meaning, they purposely try to look good or, in some cases, bad in front of their colleagues to achieve certain outcomes.

Most people try to look good at work by accomplishing goals and cooperating with others. However, sometimes workers behave badly to avoid work, gain power or other reasons. Also, some companies or managers implement policies that inadvertently encourage poor performance. To encourage productivity, look for the root cause behind the bad behavior: the employee or the organization?? Becker and Martin found several bad behaviors people typically use in the workplace.

- **Not working to potential:** Employees who want to avoid unpleasant tasks sometimes play dumb or self-deprecate. They are able to do the work, but want to avoid it. They might say, "I'm not good with numbers," or "I haven't learned that software yet." Another reason people purposely don't work to potential can be to gain power. This might seem ironic, but the study found that women in particular play dumb to avoid intimidating their male peers.
- **Decreasing productivity:** This is similar to *not working to potential*, but employees cause this to happen gradually. People might purposely make mistakes, restrict productivity or neglect work to avoid unpleasant tasks or reduce stress.
- **Displaying a poor attitude or withdrawal:** Many people know this behavior as the classic "short timer syndrome." While unproductive, workers who retire, give two-week notice or get laid-off might use this behavior to break relationships during the transition to avoid feeling loss or grief. Also, people who experience stress or low self-esteem can use this tactic to shift blame or escape. For example, they begin to take longer lunches, fake illness or defy authority in a warped effort to get relief.
- **Broadcasting limitations:** This behavior is sometimes confused with modesty or humility. However, the goal is more insidious. For example, a person has surgery and tells everyone about their condition. When these "handicapped" people continue accomplishing workplace goals, their results can seem even more amazing, because they completed the objectives despite the impairment. Sometimes people use personal situations like single parenting, divorce or financial struggle to broadcast limitations. Their motives can vary from avoiding unpleasant tasks to gaining power.

Organizational Implications



Behaving poorly on purpose is an individual decision, but company policies or procedures can also make these situations worse. For example, an organization might give more work to people who display energy or motivation. Employees in this situation might be careful not to display any special talents to avoid being "rewarded" with extra duties.

Instead of truly rewarding high productivity the company actually encourages low productivity because employees spend their energy avoiding more work.

Another example might be an employee who wants time off for a holiday. Instead of allowing the employee to take vacation, a manager explains that the department is short-staffed and people must work. In retaliation, the worker might take a "sick day," leaving the manager even more understaffed. The manager could have alleviated the situation by simply hiring workers for seasonal part-time duty. What began as a simple request, turned into a potentially severe business image problem for the company and the manager.

Regardless how employees justify their behavior, leaders and managers should be aware that bad behavior is not always an individual dysfunction. Sometimes organizational policies and procedures contribute to employees' decisions to behave badly at work.

No matter what, it's important to honestly evaluate every situation and know employees well. Building relationships with people and raising awareness of company policies and their ramifications can go far toward reducing poor performance on purpose.

If your company needs help assessing employee behavior or performance issues, Write Wise Communications can help.