Dealing with difficult staff

In previous articles, I have dwelt at length on the difficulties of selection, induction and retention of new members of staff. Possibly the most difficult step is the first – selection. This is because we tend to make decisions based only on what we see or hear at a fairly short interview or couple thereof. Let me give you an example.

An obvious contender

A while back, in the pre-registration days, we had advertised for a trainee nurse. The response had been high, and my manager and I had sifted through the long-list, selected a short-list and invited six people to attend for interviews. We were in total agreement that one bright young sixteen-year-old stood head and shoulders above the others. She was bright, alert, intelligent, presentable and tidy. She spoke well and with confidence and maintained good eye contact. Her schooling record was good, and she even brought in a couple of character references.

She was invited to come in on a one-month trial basis at a nominal salary, and told that if she cut the mustard her salary would be increased and she would be given a contract. She agreed to this and seemed pleased. She duly arrived on time, but within an hour had requested the afternoon off to attend the doctor. Fine, no sweat. She arrived back the following day, worked well, and at the end of the day said she could not come in the following day as she had to attend the funeral of a relative. Well, as you know, people do die and they must be mourned, so, again, no sweat. On the fourth day she returned, again worked well in the morning and at lunchtime asked to speak to me in my office. She duly told me that she thought her induction salary was inadequate.
and demanded an increase of 50 per cent with immediate effect. My other staff were amazed when she returned seconds later to the staffroom, collected her coat and rushed out of the surgery in mortal fear of her life.

The Umper Band
The bottom line was that I, and my manager, with all our experience, had comprehensively cocked up our selection. So it goes. Anyway, it got me thinking, and that got me reading, and I came across a lovely little book entitled *Dealing with Difficult People* by Christina Osborne. Ms Osborne presents a list of seven ‘Umpers’ which covered a broad spectrum of personality types. Look just be patient, you will soon learn what an Umper is, all right? I’ve added three more, so now we’ve got to the Power of 10. (Any of you picking which three that I’ve added can consider yourself pure genius.)

The 10 Uber-Umpers
1. DUMPERS: These are the people who, when given a series of jobs, select those which they will enjoy doing and dump the others, usually on the weakest or newest members of staff. They are self-centered and make poor team members.

2. SLUMPERS: These are a debilitating type. They have zero enthusiasm. They never complain verbally, but slump around looking sad, demanding silently that everyone else feel sorry for them. If you ask what is wrong, the answer is invariably: ‘nothing’. Despite being team players, they have no energy but drain everyone else. Hard to fire, so try poisoning.

3. JUMPERS: These are the ambitious lot. They want to climb to the top and it matters little to them on whose shoulders they step upwards. They have no scruples, and often take credit for the work of others as they seek to elevate themselves. Handle with care.

4. GRUMPERS: Are the pits. They are impossible to please. Nothing is ever right; they constantly complain and grumble all the time. They find a dark cloud in every silver lining. They are the apples that poison the barrel. Keep them away from staff meetings. In fact keep them away from everything—permanently!

5. STUMPERS: These are the unpredictable, and are usually a function of their own chemicals. Just when you think you’ve got them sussed, they do something unexpected and leave you stumped.

6. TRUMPERS: They always have to have the first and last word (and sometimes the middle ones as well). They have to be and are always one step ahead of everyone else. They can be very useful but have to be properly managed. The best way is to challenge them to put their money where their mouth is!

7. HUMPERS: These are the work horses. Nothing is too much for them. What they lack in personality they more than compensate with endeavour. Use them where hard work is required rather than the gift of the gab.

8. BUMPERS: They are a dodgy lot. When something works, it works because of them. When it doesn’t, it fails because of someone else. Again, this type can be useful if they are kept challenged, with lines of responsibility clearly set out.

9. THUMPERS: These are the bully-boys and girls. They get their own way by being aggressive and intimidating others. Being assertive with them usually suffices.

10. FRUMPERS: An untidy lot. It’s not that they don’t want to tidy the mess around them, they just cannot see it. Can be managed by simply asking them to do the job rather than criticising what they haven’t done.

The point of this list is not that it helps you select the right person, but it assists in assessing the personality type that will best suit the job spec that you need to fill. That way, you don’t try to fit square pegs in round holes. Since selling his prize-winning dentistry100 practice, Ed Bonner acts as a consultant (guru) and practice coach to the dental profession, working with individuals as well as groups of dentists. He can be reached at bonner.edwin@gmail.com.

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