

How to Tell If You Are a Bad Employee

Do regular career self-assessments, including feedback from co-workers, bosses and customers

By DENNIS NISHI

"She's a bully" and "obnoxious" are what San Francisco-based career coach Joel Garfinkle heard from employees at a Silicon Valley tech company about a colleague. The company had approached Mr. Garfinkle because its managers needed coaching help. Their best salesperson wasn't getting along with her co-workers and managers, who frequently complained about her insensitive behavior.

"I found that people didn't want to work with her or for her. It was quite an eye opener for her, but the truth was right there on paper," says Mr. Garfinkle, who conducted interviews with co-workers, subordinates and managers and confronted the teary employee with the results.

It took a year, but Mr. Garfinkle was able to help the employee improve her empathy and listening skills, which eventually led to higher productivity and a promotion.

Whether you're a good employee or bad, experts recommend that all employees do regular career self-assessments that include feedback from co-workers, bosses, customers, vendors and even family and friends.

And you shouldn't wait for the annual review—especially if you find that you're working harder to achieve the same goals, are being passed up for promotions and aren't being invited to important meetings that you were invited to before. These are signs that you may already have a tarnished workplace image.

Not the Best Judge

The problem is that humans in general are bad at judging themselves so they may wait too long to act, says David Dunning, a professor of psychology at Cornell University who researches how people perceive their own skills and competence.



Michael Witte

"We've found that good employees are best attuned to rooting out their strengths and weaknesses but bad employees are the worst at it," he says. "There are a lot of people whose only impediment to them improving is that they don't know that they need to improve."

Unfortunately, most organizations only give feedback when deciding on merit pay, and that may not be helpful, Mr. Dunning says.

"The review becomes tied to consequences that make people emotionally involved," he says. "That's why self-assessment should also be done more frequently and outside of those situations."

When you ask your colleagues for feedback, don't put them on the spot with character questions.

Take the emotion out of the equation by asking for actionable feedback on your behaviors with questions such as: "What should I be working on?" "What would you like to see more of?" or "How do I come across in these situations?"

Don't get defensive if you don't agree with the feedback. You want to encourage uninhibited answers by showing that you're completely open to both positive and negative feedback.

You can make the process easier for colleagues by taking them out of a workplace setting.

Meet over lunch or coffee during the weekend and open the conversation by revealing a flaw, says Mr. Garfinkle. "You can say something like, 'I know that I become impatient in certain situations but I'm trying to work on that.' "

Benchmark yourself against colleagues. How do they deal with situations similar to those that you work with? You may find that there are better ways to handle issues that you may not have ever considered.

Make an 'Action Plan'

Once you get your feedback, formalize your intent to make a change by creating an action plan that addresses your negative perception. You won't be able to change other people's behavior but you can change your own by diagraming how you'll use the feedback.

Keep colleagues that provided you with feedback apprised of your progress to show that you've taken their advice seriously.

At the same time, you'll be increasing your visibility by bringing them into your plan as advocates and showing that you've got the will to improve and succeed.

Many people tend to backslide over time and revert to their old habits so it helps to have somebody reliable to check on you regularly, says Mr. Garfinkle. "It should be an ongoing process that evolves as you change."

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