
Manager Goes Wacko. Now What?

Contributed by Paul Glen
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We've all seen it happen. Self-destruction. Career-limiting behavior. Professional suicide. Some previously normal and capable IT manager suddenly starts acting strangely and destructively. He figuratively sets his hair on fire and runs around the building screaming of cabals at the top of his lungs. And we all stand by, watching the slow-motion train wreck, shaking our heads and whispering yet not knowing what to do.

If you are the supervisor of such a person, you've got a challenge on your hands. What do you do with a solid performer who seems to be going down a rathole and may take others with him? What do you owe the organization, the manager and the manager's subordinates?

The answer to these questions rests with the answers to a few more.

1. Why is this happening? Of course, every case is different, and the reasons may not be immediately apparent. But over the years, I've noticed a few causes that seem more common than others. They include these:

Personal relationship disruption: Death, divorce and breakups seem to top the list. The disruption of a family or relationship is a devastating experience. Grief, anger and confusion spill over into the workplace and can lead to behavior that's confusing, in part, because it's unrelated to the work environment.

Didn't get the job: When someone is passed over for a promotion or a desired assignment, he can react unpredictably. He may try to undermine the person who did get the job, lashing out or perhaps trying to foment a coup. He may simply try to provoke others to confirm his value and worth.

In over his head: Let's face a sad fact: Some managers have been overpromoted. They rise too high or too fast for their own good, lacking the knowledge, skills or maturity for the

position they hold. Some discover that they wanted the title but not the job. Most managers who are in over their heads know it. They can panic or react unpredictably. They see no way back to where they belong and can become unhinged by the experience.

Protest: Sometimes a manager sees his strange behavior as a solemn duty or moral crusade. Rightly or wrongly, he may feel that a decision made or an approach taken is so damaging to the organization or so unethical that it requires an extraordinary response — even a self-damaging one. He may realize that he is risking his career but be willing to suffer the consequences.

Wants to be fired: Sometimes a manager feels trapped in his job. He doesn't really want the job but doesn't feel free to quit or change. He may not want to walk away from the money, give up the status or face the wrath of a disapproving family. So, consciously or not, he hopes that you will solve the problem by taking the decision out of his hands.

Mental illness: Sometimes a seeming mental breakdown is just that: a descent into madness (that you hope will be temporary). Depression and substance abuse are common. No one is completely immune to the possibility of such illness.

2. Is this person's career in this organization salvageable? You need to ask if the individual involved can be rehabilitated either as a manager or as an individual contributor. If given time and support, can he return to the mainstream?

3. Are there legal or cultural constraints on your options?

4. Does this person have unique and essential knowledge or skills? With the answers to these questions, you can generate and evaluate options within the context of the situation. When evaluating these options, I'd suggest that you keep two priorities uppermost in your mind: to minimize damage to others (subordinates, peers, clients) and to treat the individual fairly.

The most effective responses that I've seen include these:

Dismissal: Sometimes you need to fire a person to protect the staff and the organization.

Time in the wilderness: Working alone on some noncritical project can give a person time to calm down, reflect on

past behavior and prepare for reintegration into the group. An i

important special assignment: Have him work on his own, but give him a project that is genuinely critical to the group.

Meltdowns happen. How you handle them not only helps those in distress but communicates your values to the rest of the organization. When you've got one on your hands, think carefully, but don't think for too long before acting.

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