

ONE EVERY IN BUNCH

If they're not managed correctly, a disaffected employee can sour the entire workplace. So how should you handle the bad apples?

WORDS CHRIS SHEEDY

You know the type. There's the gossipmonger, ready to whisper a new and damaging tale about one of your workmates as you pass in the hallway. Then there's the manipulative bully, whose actions make you dread coming in to work each day. And don't forget the loudmouth, who takes credit for everybody else's hard work and somehow ends up in a management role.

These are some of the stereotypes into which we try to sort the people who make the daily grind a true 'grind'. But really, a stereotype is all it is, says Mark Shaw, CEO of Neos HR. For almost three decades Shaw has worked with organisations to solve their people problems.

"I would argue that you shouldn't try and put these people into boxes," Shaw says. "Instead I would argue strongly that the bad apples are predominantly people who are not engaged. That might be because of a specific management problem, or it might be simply because management has not perceived what is happening as a management problem."

Shaw gives an example of a staff member whose behaviour has gone sharply downhill and who has also regularly been absent from work. As a result, his department is suffering all types of problems and discussions begin about how to remove him from the business. After managers finally talk through the issues with the individual, they discover his father has cancer and is dying.


"Is that a toxic employee? I have to say no," Shaw says. "But was he a bad apple at the time because he was causing a major management problem? Yes."

Identifying toxic employees

Why is it so difficult for organisations to identify the problem people; the staff who make life hell for those around them every day? Bernie Althofer, managing director of EGL I Assessments, says people who cause such problems are only allowed to roam free because of a particular type of organisational culture where the behaviours are tolerated to the point of acceptance.

"Really good organisations encourage people to work together," he says. "They have a good blend of diversity and a strong health and safety culture. They have an openness and transparency where they allow people to raise issues without being criticised. They deal with minor complaints promptly and they have an underpinning belief in respect and dignity. It's just the way they do business."

David Arkell, HR leader at GE, describes his own organisation as one that »

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a bruised orange. The hand is wearing a light blue, textured glove. The orange is heavily bruised and discolored, with a mix of orange, red, and yellow tones. The background is a solid, light blue color. In the top right corner, there is a teal-colored L-shaped graphic element.

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has just such a culture. This allows the business to identify and see a clear difference between people with serious compliance and integrity issues – and those who are simply struggling to fit in to the organisation from a values perspective.

“Anybody can raise a concern confidentially about anything at a global level,” says Arkell. “That gets fed back down through the organisation for investigation, and we investigate everything. We don’t do any triaging of issues. If an employee raises a concern about another employee over a compliance issue, we will investigate. If an employee raises a concern about their manager in the organisation and their potentially inappropriate behaviour, bullying, harassment etc, we have a very transparent and open process, much more so than I’ve seen in many other organisations.”

Shaw likes to draw an analogy with dentistry when considering a bad apple in a company.

“When a patient is suffering tooth pain, the goal is to fix the pain, not remove the tooth. The dentist goes through a process to figure out what exactly is wrong, and how to resolve the actual cause of the pain. If there is absolutely no way to solve that problem then, only on rare occasions, the dentist will remove the tooth. Managing bad apples in the workplace should be the same.”

Altofer agrees. “While it is important to identify and support those identified as ‘bad apples’ or ‘toxic employees’, it is equally important to ensure that the systems or processes used to form a judgement are conducted by experienced professionals,” he says.



What can counterproductive behaviour cost the business?

A toxic employee costs the business at least the equivalent of the individual’s salary – and likely more, Shaw says. In order to explain, he uses the example of a badly behaved accounts payable person being paid \$50,000 annually.

“As this individual is not highly paid, you might consider that their behaviour is less of a problem,” Shaw says. “But if you have someone in that role who is toxic, who gossips and bullies and so on, then firstly, everybody wants to avoid them, but they can’t get their accounts paid if they avoid them permanently; secondly, they’re spending a large portion of their time running around being a nuisance, so are not really doing their job; and finally, their manager, who is on \$200,000, is spending 20 per

KILLING Bambi

Allowing bad behaviour to fester at work costs more than time and money. You could lose your best employees, too.

BOOK EXTRACT FROM THE 2% EFFECT BY
DI ARMBRUST IN COLLABORATION WITH
MARK SHAW

‘Bambi’ is a euphemism I’ve coined for your good employees – those worker bees and ‘gifts’ (highly motivated and productive employees) who keep on keeping on for you and therefore, keep delivering the requirements of your business.

So ‘Killing Bambi’ refers to what happens to the 98 per cent of your employees – your worker bees and gifts – when you don’t deal with the 2%ers.

Nothing is more distracting or more

off-putting in business than people behaving badly. Unfortunately, the 98 per cent are generally too polite to say anything to these people. However, they are sitting there wishing you, their manager, would do something about them. They can’t understand why you don’t.

The poor behaviours or performances of the 2%ers also impacts on the performance of worker bees and gifts. My experience tells me that the distraction caused by one of these 2%ers can affect the productivity of your good employees and you by around 20 per cent. So that’s one-fifth of your wage bill that is going by the wayside. It’s good money down the drain.



“Really good organisations encourage people to work together”

BERNIE ALTHOFER, MANAGING DIRECTOR OF EGL I ASSESSMENTS



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WHAT IS COUNTER-PRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR?

It is important to consider the broad range of counter-productive behaviour that can occur in the workplace, says Bernie Althofer, managing director of EGL I Assessments. Althofer’s list includes:

- bullying
- harassment
- sexual harassment
- deviance
- corruption
- absenteeism
- drug and alcohol abuse
- plagiarism
- employee theft of time
- misuse of company resources in the pursuit of a private venture
- gossiping
- use of organisational information technology to transmit pornographic images

cent of their own time – often more – trying to solve the problem.”

Businesses must also count the cost of contractors employed to do the work of toxic employees as well as workplace claims and counter-claims, Althofer says. After all, almost every costly work-related case currently in the law courts began as a behaviour issue.

Other costs that are more difficult to measure include lowered productivity, higher employee turnover, increased absenteeism and presenteeism, adverse publicity and loss of employer brand (leading to attraction and retention issues), workplace accidents and security issues.

What to do with bad apples

A full investigation to understand precisely what is going on, with all parties interviewed, should be carried out prior to action being planned

and taken. Such an investigation can have complicated outcomes. For instance, often the root cause may be outside the control of the person’s manager, Althofer says. In these cases, managers must report up the line until those with responsibility for the specific hazard are made aware of the issue and are compelled to act.

The commitment of top management is essential in solving behavioural issues in the workplace and ensuring they do not become regular occurrences, Shaw says.

“Once you have correctly identified a bad apple by their behaviour, start identifying and articulating the management problem,” Shaw says.

“Once you do that, the pain is in the past. Then it’s simple – your goal is to turn the employee’s behaviour around and if you can’t, then you terminate.”•••

In business, the culture is set not just by what leaders say or what is documented, but also by whether there is a match between what is said or written and what is done.

People generally know that they have to do their job and do it well. So if you let a 2%er get away with misbehaving or underperforming to an unacceptable level, it causes confusion for your good people.

Similarly, these good people get frustrated listening to the whingeing from the 2%er or see the 2%er wasting time or not doing as they are told. If the 2%er is in a work team, that team will only be as good as their weakest link; in this case, the 2%er. »



“Good people get frustrated as they listen to the whingeing from the 2%er or see the 2%er wasting time.”



The ‘Killing Bambi’ Life Cycle

It is interesting to note what happens if a 2%er does not get managed.

The first phase of the ‘Killing Bambi’ life cycle starts with your good people starting to question your management capability. They look at you to see if you will do anything. They want you to do something. They start talking among themselves. Your management approach starts being questioned and commented on. Downtime from work starts to increase as they discuss you, not just the 2%er.

The second phase is the frustration phase. Their frustration becomes more tangible and permeates through the work environment. The frustration of one person feeds the frustration of another. More talking and downtime occurs. The emotional build-up can cause distractions in their work. Sometimes workplace accidents can occur because of these distractions.

The third phase is where they become resigned; resigned to the fact that you are not going to do anything about the 2%er. You are considered a poor manager. The talking is reduced but views are confirmed. Disengagement starts to happen. What once was a great place to work may no longer be viewed that way.

More downtime occurs as these good employees start to look for another job. The top reason consistently shown in surveys about why employees leave a job is that they leave because of their manager. So your good employees want to leave because of you.

Guess what? They are a good employee, so generally they won’t find it difficult to find another job. Maybe in a tight labour market it take some time, but they will find another job.

You have just lost one of your good employees. You have just ‘killed Bambi’. What hasn’t changed is that you still have your 2%er, who is causing a problem and making life miserable for everything else.

This will become cyclic if the 2%er is not managed.

I have had discussions with a number of managers over the years and asked them why they don’t quickly deal with their 2%ers. Some of them tell me that they think the 2%er will eventually resign. Some say that it is too much hard work. Alternatively, some tell me that it takes too much of their attention to deal with them and they just don’t have the time.

Well, in response to the first reason – assuming the 2%er will resign – my experience tells me that it rarely happens. Why? Because the 2%er can get away with doing whatever they are doing in your business. In some ways, they feel like they are in charge. It makes them feel good.

“Your good people start to question your management capability. They look at you to see if you will do anything.”

Why would they leave a job where they are comfortable and can get away with things?

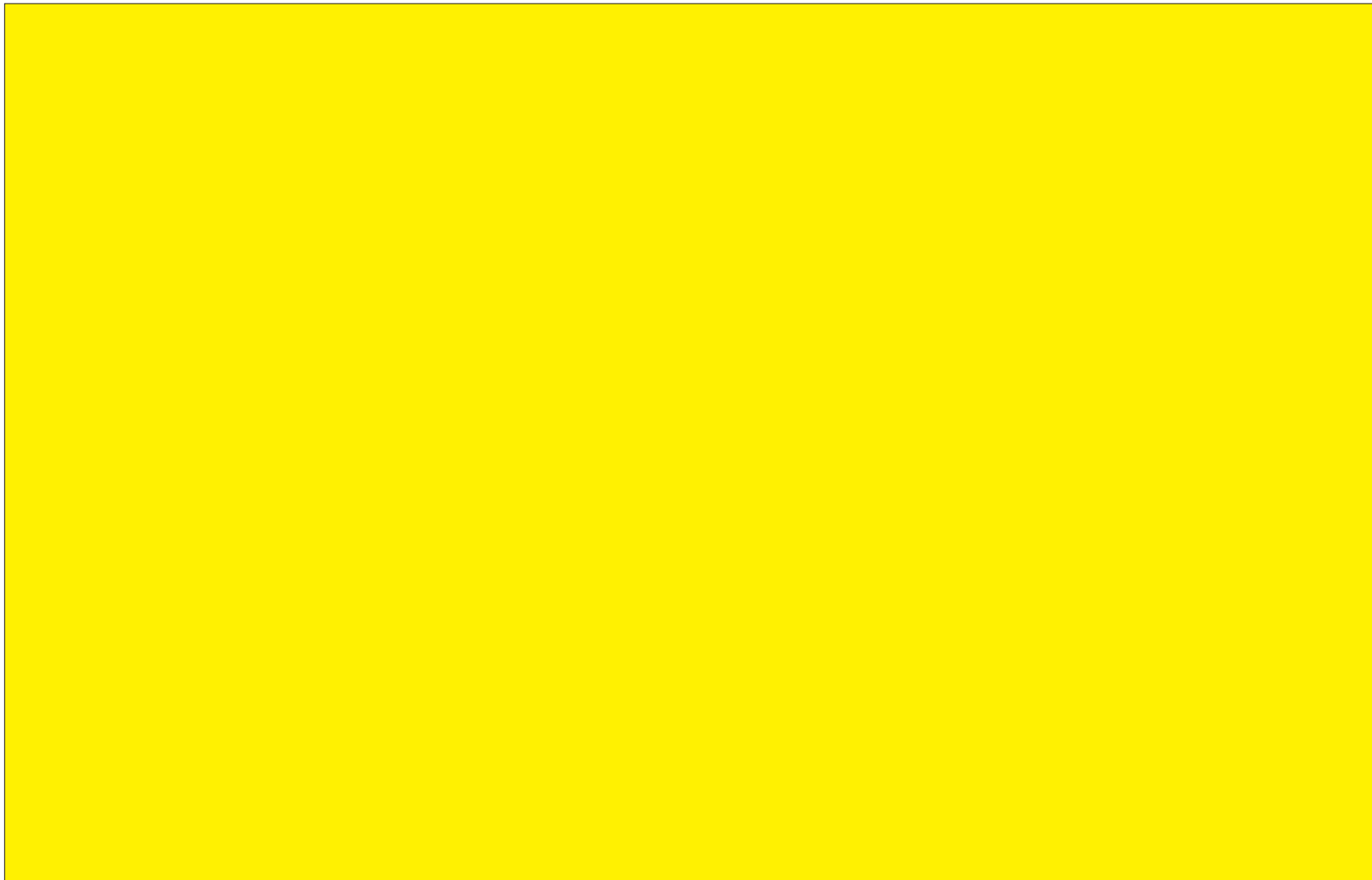
In the second case, trying to avoid the hard work is a false economy. The time spent with these high-maintenance employees over time is far more than the amount of time required to quickly fix the problem. Sure, some concentrated effort is required and paperwork will need to be attended to off and on, but from then on the pressure eases.

The time you could have spent on fixing your problem by dealing with the 2%er is now replaced by having to train a new employee. Why? Because one or more of your ‘Bambis’ have now been ‘killed’ and you have a period of lower productivity because the new employee will take longer to reach the levels of productivity of your previous ‘Bambis’.

Of course, you also have to consider the cost of recruiting a new employee, which is estimated to be between six months’ and two years’ salary or wage, depending on the type of role. This estimation is based on both the hard costs of recruiting – that is, the cost to advertise, pay a recruiter and so on – and the soft costs, which include training for the job and loss of productivity compared to an experienced employee.

So the lesson that this article and my experience have taught me was that if your 2%ers aren’t quickly dealt with, you are at risk of losing your good employees; your ‘Bambis’. I think I would probably prefer to lose my 2%er. Wouldn’t you? •••

This excerpt comes from the book The 2% Effect by Di Armbrust, in collaboration with Mark Shaw.



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