

Five Warning Signs of a Problem Overachiever

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Overachievers are great to have on your team, but sometimes their obsession with success can go too far. They're used to setting impossible goals and then meeting them, but they can melt down when their extraordinary efforts fail. They can also develop unhealthy habits, like working long hours and skipping meals and sleep. Few overachievers become truly dysfunctional, but it's important to recognize the warning signs before behavior becomes destructive. Here's what to look out for and how to respond:

1. Work Addiction

Symptoms: Some overachievers use work to avoid negative feelings. They constantly think and talk about work, can't #turn it off# at the end of the day, and don't take vacations or lunch breaks.

What to do: Workaholics tend to drag out a task with unnecessary attention to detail, so you need to establish their priorities for them and monitor progress closely. Reward the results of their work, not the amount of time they spend, and insist that they take lunch breaks and leave at a decent hour. If the problem persists, involve your human resources manager, who may recommend meeting with a counselor or taking the self-test at the [Workaholics Anonymous website](#).

2. Depression and Self-Criticism

Symptoms: Inability to cope with failure is another warning sign. If a colleague is unusually quiet or low-energy, taking lots of sick days, or skipping meetings and company functions — particularly after a setback at work — take note. #Everyone fails now and then, but it's difficult for overachievers to deal with that,# says Tom Kinnear, executive director of the Zell Lurie Institute for Entrepreneurial Studies at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan. #On occasion, you will see dysfunctional behavior that drives the person to the point of suicide when they've set a goal they can never, ever meet.#

What to do: Tread carefully. #Managers need to refer the person to a professional psychologist for help and not try and deal with it on their own,# Kinnear says. Address the issue directly with the employee, but don't tell them, #I read this article about obsessive-compulsive disorder and I think this is what you have,# says psychologist and executive coach Robert Pasick. Never give medical

advice or offer a diagnosis. Instead, refer anyone with an emotional problem to a mental health professional through your human resources department.

3. Unethical Behavior

Symptoms: Most overachievers don't fall into this category, but some can cross legal and ethical boundaries in order to reach their goals. Case in point: Enron. If someone on your team consistently breaks rules to get ahead — for example, neglecting to fill out important legal paperwork because it takes too much time and they can't be bothered — don't ignore the problem. It could lead to serious legal issues down the road.

What to do: If you think an employee has acted unethically, keep an eye on the situation and record your observations. When you've gathered sufficient evidence, approach the person with another manager or someone from human resources to serve as a witness. Review policies and procedures and ask the employee if they read and signed them when joining the company. Give them another copy, if needed. #Document the event, put the notes in their employee file, and tell them if they continue to display this type of behavior the company will have to let them go,# says Roxanne Cherry, a clinical psychologist in Laguna Beach, Calif. At this point, she says, most employees will realize they've crossed a serious line and will shape up or get professional help.

4. Hypercriticism

Symptoms: If an overachiever shows blatant disregard for other opinions or actively looks for faults in others, it can cause a serious rift with colleagues. Sometimes criticism is necessary to improve performance and get work done, but it becomes destructive when negative comments far outweigh the positive ones.

What to do: A #management coach,# a nonthreatening term for counselor, can provide guidance without the employee becoming alarmed at the stigma of professional help. Small companies that can't afford a full-time coach or psychologist should have access to someone who's on call for emergencies. Mentoring programs that pair experienced members of your company with up-and-comers can also assist in putting hypercritical people back on the right track. Mentors can provide wise counsel on tough workplace challenges and give feedback to develop new skills and competencies.

5. Physical or Emotional Abuse

Symptoms: Most warning signs are difficult for the overachiever to recognize in himself. The biggest is a quick loss of temper, such as swearing, yelling, huffing out of a room, or pounding on the table. Sometimes an overachiever will tease other team members in order to motivate them without realizing that it causes undue stress.

What to do: Set guidelines and clear boundaries. Make a list of contingency plans. For example, #If you pound your fist on the table and storm out of the weekly meeting one more time, you'll need to take a class in anger management.# In this case, trying to talk it out is usually ineffective and might anger the person even more. Dysfunctional overachievers #aren't easy to talk or reason with and respond better to rules,# psychologist Pasick says.
