

## What To Do With Attitude Problems? Promote Them!

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**S**truggling to figure out how to fire an employee who is delivering on his job, but making everyone miserable in the process? Consider promoting him instead.

One of the worst injustices organizations impose upon their employees is underutilization. Research suggests about one in five of us is underemployed.

This situation usually “presents” as six months of stellar performance followed by a distinct shift in attitude. It leaves managers scratching their heads saying, “What happened to the motivated guy I hired?”

What you have here is an employee who possesses problem solving capability beyond that called for by his job. Let’s call him Joe. Joe takes the first few months to learn the culture, the players, and the job. Along the way, he picks some “low hanging fruit”, makes some immediate positive changes and delivers beyond his manager’s expectations. About the time the manager is patting herself on the back for hiring such a gem, Joe traverses his learning curve, and it happens – the ‘tude.

The ‘tude can take many forms to include silent withdrawal but will likely take the form of grouching or complaining, maybe beginning with covert and escalating to more overt. It may be verbal or may be more subtle with body language and heavy sighs. Joe, himself, may not fully grasp why he is suddenly dissatisfied with his job.

Generally at this point, peers and managers alike begin to see Joe as arrogant, full of himself, and rightly so. Why? If problem solving capability occurs in distinct layers and Joe’s ability is one level beyond that called for by his job, then, he is likely capable beyond his peer group, and nobody likes a “showoff”, right? And, to add insult to

injury, that also means Joe is likely capable at the same level as his manager. This leaves Joe “nipping at his manager’s heels”. His manager feels threatened, and Joe feels undermanaged.

When the problem can no longer be ignored, Joe’s manager will be forced to begin coaching him, if for no other reason than to begin the documentation process for his dismissal. This usually starts with motivational speeches on being a team player. From there, we move to more direct threats, “You play nice, or we’ll have to let you go.”

Joe knows his attitude stinks, but it takes tremendous energy for him to maintain his “game face” nine hours a day. Joe becomes increasingly angry. His work bores him. With his extra capacity, he can see things in his department that need fixing, but he doesn’t have the authority or resources to fix them. Moreover, rather than being appreciated for his brilliance, everyone around him resents him. He feels alienated and frustrated, not to mention underpaid. He can’t look to his manager for help, because his manager just doesn’t “get it”.

To add to this toxic mix, Joe will likely feel a rapport with his manager’s manager (because this person is likely capable beyond Joe’s level, and this is what we intuitively seek out in a manager). Unfortunately, if Joe tries to develop more than a basic relationship with his manager-once-removed so he can garner some satiating leadership, the political beast roars. Joe is now accused of going over his manager’s head. Joe can’t win.

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*Note: This is when some of your best people leave your organization—dehumanized and angry.*

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If Joe doesn’t leave of his own accord, this is when, in enlightened organizations, we call in the consultants to fix Joe - once again sending Joe the message that he is a delinquent. Calling in help is cloaked as a benevolent gesture and may very well be. However, it is likely coupled with the desire to avoid a wrongful discharge lawsuit, because, after all, Joe is fulfilling the requirements of his job description. Again, it’s just the attitude that stinks.

The well-intentioned consultant will investigate and provide a diagnosis. A variety of root causes may surface, none being: “Joe is overqualified for his job.” I can bet the farm, no job-valuing consultant’s suggested intervention would read: “Promote Joe.”

The sad part here is that in the absence of a proper diagnosis, a misdiagnosis will be made. At best, this will only leave the current situation unchanged. At worst, it will make the situation worse by wasting time, money, and possibly Joe’s reputation.

What if the consultant decides Joe lacks respect for his manager because she is female. This is proved by the fact that he goes over her head to talk with her male manager on a regular basis right? Or maybe Joe just lacks soft skills, so communications training will fix things, right?

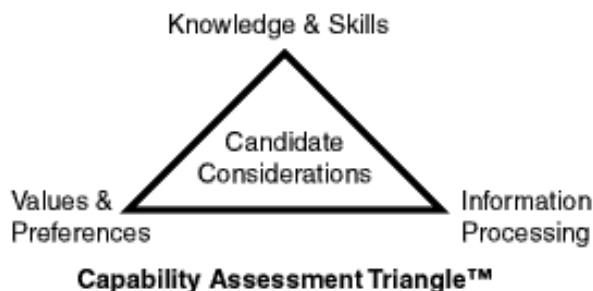
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*Note: This is when some of your best people leave your organization – VERY dehumanized, angry and, possibly, vengeful.*

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I’d like to suggest an alternative diagnostic process any manager can use the next time he is faced with an employee with major ‘tude. When matching an employee to a job, please consider three things:

1. Knowledge, skills and experience.  
(What he knows.)
2. Values and preferences.  
(What he naturally enjoys.)
3. Problem solving capability.  
(His ability to organize, extrapolate, and apply information to plan and make decisions.\*)



\*Elliott Jaques’ term for problem solving capability is complexity of information processing (CIP), and

it is present in discreet, increasing complex levels. Meaning, people vary in the *amount* of information they can attend to, and their comfort level for dealing with ambiguity and longer-term projects also varies.

All jobs align with a specific level of CIP. Matching an employee’s CIP level with that called for by a job is the key to job satisfaction and success. Mismatching them, with merely ONE employee, will lead to a severe case of ‘tude which can mushroom into the disruption of an entire department.

To avoid this, you can use the aforementioned triad of items as your model for matching employees to jobs. When considering if “Joe Attitude” is indeed overqualified and thus could perform a higher level role, ask yourself the following:

If Joe Attitude *wanted* to do the higher level job (values and preferences) AND ... he had an opportunity to gain the *knowledge, skills* and *experience* necessary for it... Could he make the kinds of judgments necessary for the role and manage projects with the time horizons associated with it?

This questioning process allows a manager to isolate the CIP component of the triad model, and it will tell you if Joe currently has the problem solving capability, i.e. the raw talent, to step into a higher level role. (Some training for knowledge or skills may still be necessary.)

If the answer is yes, do what you can to get Joe the knowledge, skills, and experience he needs to take that next level job. Sit him down to let him know there is a promotion on the horizon for him and watch this news change that ‘tude in a way no well-intentioned “intervention” ever could.

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