■ BY JOE MOORE

Here's **trouble**

When everyone seems to have friction with the same worker, a sacking is a tempting solution—but it probably means missing an opportunity to sort out deeper problems.

Authoritarian management, anger and aggression, backstabbing, disrespect, dysfunctional communication, office politics and related issues are like toxins in the modern workplace. They poison the environment, creating ever-increasing levels of conflict. If nothing is done, they can have a smothering effect, or the smallest spark can ignite an explosion.

Often, one or a few individuals cop the blame as the source of the problems. They are labeled as troublemakers and the temptation is to conclude that the solution is simply to get rid of them.

But it is rarely that straightforward.

An HR practitioner in a large corporation recently described a familiar situation: a large workgroup in the corporation had been having interpersonal difficulties for several years.

To outsiders, the situation was hard to understand. Otherwise competent and mature adults were unable to put aside personal feelings to get the work of the group done. They had reached a point where apparently insignificant issues could result in a total communication breakdown for weeks at a time. Productivity was suffering and people were avoiding coming to work, and talking of quitting.

Supposedly at the centre of it all was an administrative assistant. We'll call her Sally.

"I used to love my job, but everything has changed over the last year or so," said the HR person. "We have a really bad situation, and Sally is the problem. She can't seem to work with anyone without alienating them. She's demanding, combative, insensitive and rude, even to her superiors.

"No-one does anything about it. They just try to stay out of her way. But the effects are terrible. Our team has broken down and everyone seems to have divided into factions. People are ignoring, gossiping about and trying to undermine each other. We can't even seem to look at each other, let alone sit in meetings or have lunch together like we used to."

The practitioner admitted it was over "petty stuff": who didn't make the coffee, or didn't restock the supply cupboard, or took too long a break and so on. He said it felt like being back in high school.

"All this seems to have originated with Sally. I heard that she was a troublemaker at her previous job too.

"I don't know how much longer I can stand it. I wake up every morning and dread going to work. I've been seriously thinking of quitting."

We have all known a Sally, or a male equivalent. For whatever reason, they are the one almost everyone would point to if asked who doesn't fit in. They refuse to be part of the team, they always seem in conflict with one or more of the people around them, and they test the goodwill of even the most patient and well-intentioned.

Sally's co-workers had come to explain her behaviour, and their own bad feelings, by referring to her distorted personality, damaged psychology, impaired intelligence or mean spirit.

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Most of us have felt the gut-twisting anxiety of having to front up each day at places that seem poisoned by the way one or a few fellow workers relate to the others. We long for the day when someone either makes them behave or gets rid of them. This is equally true of those who supervise a person like Sally as it is of her peers. Yet nothing changes.

Such issues are often difficult to recognise and articulate. People prefer to get on with their own jobs, pushing the issues away by trying to normalise or minimise them, or by rationalising their lack of an active response.

A "troublemaker" is often like the canary in a coalmine that succumbs first to deadly, invisible methane. A person like Sally may effectively be an early warning system, making otherwise unrecognised workplace issues visible. Her problematic behaviour may be both a cause of conflict and a result of it.

In our caller's case, Sally had deep resentment from her perceptions that, despite being bright and capable, she was constantly micro-managed and talked down to by her superior. She had seen her manager lash out at other employees, some of whom had later quit or been let go, and heard him give poor references when prospective new employers made enquiries.

The manager engaged in toxic behaviour of his own—selectively, and when his peers and superiors were not around, enabling him to maintain the support of other management personnel. Sally knew that people were much more inclined to view her as the problem than him, and she felt powerless.

The difficulty in recognising, valuing and dealing with Sally as a workplace "canary" is that it is all too easy to focus on the harm she seems to cause without provocation. It is hard to take into account that her antisocial behaviour may be a rational response to experiences and circumstances about which little is known.

In workplaces that lack effective mechanisms for recognising and dealing with so-called troublemakers and relationship breakdowns generally, colleagues and supervisors typically throw up their hands and perhaps look to more senior managers to deal with the situation. In the meantime, they avoid the person as much as possible, and are

MANAGING THE BLAME

Difficult workers who don't fit in can be a particularly unpleasant challenge for managers. But there are ways to make such situations a lot easier to deal with, and usually avoid in the first place:

- Be on the lookout for recurring themes in problem situations—who's involved, the nature of the complaints and behaviour, the effects.
- Be aware of the "we just can't find good people" syndrome. It may be true that everyone who applies for a job with your organisation, or for a particular position or workgroup, is inherently under-motivated, incompetent, malcontent and a poor team worker— but is that really likely?
- When faced with a problem situation, avoid psychology in the first instance. Instead of trying to work out what is wrong with the person who seems to be acting badly, start by asking what things in the workplace might be making an otherwise good person act unhelpfully.
- When people start to talk negatively about an employee, sit up and take notice—something needs to be done. Ask what happened and why, how people have been affected, and what needs to

happen to make things better. Hold the team or group accountable for doing what needs to be done to make things better.

- Evaluate workplace performance and systematically explore opportunities to improve in areas such as:
  - operating procedures and work instructions
  - communicating, sharing information, providing and acting on feedback
  - team-meeting effectiveness, documented outcomes and actions implemented
  - internal measurement and business performance reports
  - business vision and planning
  - individual accountability, initiative
  - quality assurance, performance standards and expectations, performance appraisal
  - client relationships
  - manager/supervisor consistency in words and actions
  - consistent application of rules and expectations.

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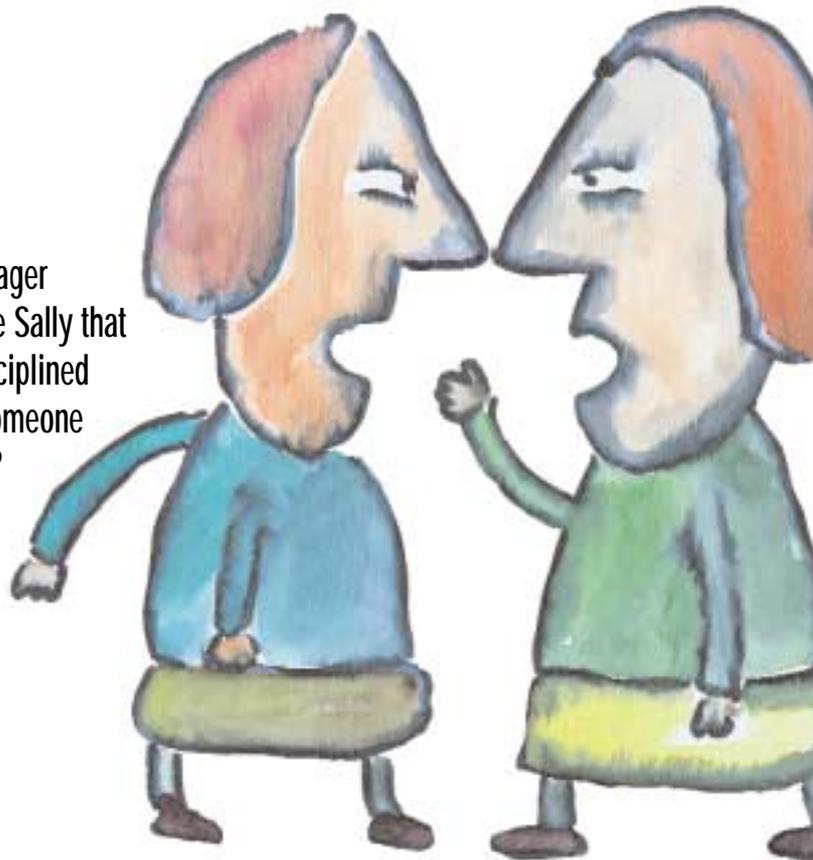
sometimes driven to act inappropriately by distress over their behaviour.

Like the troublemaker's peers, managers tend to be poorly equipped to confront and deal with the problem. They can have the power to invoke disciplinary procedures, but such responses are only likely to make the situation worse.

Sally's manager was reluctant to even consider disciplining her, and, looked at in isolation, each of her "offences" didn't seem to justify such a response. How can a manager tell someone like Sally that she is being disciplined for looking at someone disdainfully, or using a condescending tone, or intentionally ignoring someone. No competent union representative would allow it to go unchallenged.

Sally's manager chose to ignore specific instances of problematic behaviour, even if they occurred in front of him. He dismissed or minimised the significance of employees' complaints about them, creating more difficulties in the web of relationships.

At the same time, out of frustration and anger, the manager started targeting Sally, looking for any excuse to come down hard on her. He found reasons to rebuke and ridicule her while avoiding discussions about specific behaviour. The thought of firing her was never far from his mind. In the work-place's cycle of reactive behaviour, the idea emerged as a shared if unspoken solution.

The group was clearly failing to share valuable information, and as a result it could not see how the manager's behaviour contributed to the difficulties.

Labelling and targeting people as problem employees leads to ill-considered responses, and unidentified contributing factors will remain to affect the business long after they have gone. The constant emergence and escalation of reactive behaviour sets up a self-perpetuating cycle of hiring and firing. Employers become cynical about their employees and a more authoritarian approach to management can emerge.

Someone like Sally should be seen as both a problem to be addressed and a clue that something more may be wrong in the workplace. A group learning process is needed for the sharing of information about what is happening and why, how everyone is affected and what needs to be done about it. The process should be aimed at forming considered, effective responses to difficult situations.

Sure, this sounds like a lot of work when compared to just jettisoning Sally. But approaching and responding to complex situations in simplistic and authoritarian ways inevitably leads to problems with workplace relationships in the long term.

And you could be killing your messenger. It is highly unlikely that Sally's inappropriate behaviour was entirely due to her personality and independent of any other workplace issues.

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