

What should Jane do about her top performer's mean streak?

Four commentators offer their advice.



“In general, the worst thing a supervisor can do is to sometimes reward and sometimes punish unacceptable behavior.”

Mary Rowe teaches negotiations and conflict management at the Sloan School of Management at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is an MIT ombudsperson.

PORTRAITS: RANDY GLASS

I'm going to approach this problem as if I were TechniCo's organizational ombudsperson – which means that I'm a confidential neutral. I'm an informal coach and shuttle diplomat within the company, looking into problems and working toward systemic changes.

Jane should prepare for this challenge as she would for a project launch. She needs to quickly collect a lot of information. And she must protect everyone's privacy—including Andy's—along the way.

She should start by gathering information about the people involved and the context of the organizational setting. Does the company have policies about mean behavior—perhaps a “core values” statement about “dignity and respect at TechniCo”? Official statements like this—and good training programs—can offer managers much-needed help and support. Other questions to ask: Would her bosses want to know about the problems with Andy? Is he following the tone set by TechniCo's top executives, or would they want to see Andy's behavior change? Is there a person from HR who could be helpful? And how is the company doing? What are Jane's team's interests? What are the technical and interpersonal skills of the other team members?

Next, Jane should analyze her own interests and power, as well as Andy's.

Does she have strong power to reward and sanction? Does she have moral authority, derived from company policy or her own character? What's her technical expertise? Does she have a fallback position if this situation goes bad? As for Andy's interests and sources of power: Does he want a new assignment? Is he indispensable? Does he have other offers? Finally, she should consider the various kinds of power each team member wields: Do any of them have other offers? Might a desperate Caroline complain about Andy to her old friend the CEO?

If, after analyzing the situation and considering the interests and power of all parties, Jane decides to work directly with Andy, she'll need to get his attention. She might suggest that he watch the movie *What Women Want* or that he take the quiz in Harry Levinson's 1978 HBR article, “The Abrasive Personality.” Alternatively, a tough order from Jane's boss, transmitted through her, might capture Andy's attention, if that option is appropriate. Notice that I didn't suggest that she directly confront him. She should ask him to work *with* her to develop an elegant solution—one that satisfies all the interests at stake.

In general, the worst thing a supervisor can do is to sometimes reward and

sometimes punish unacceptable behavior. This is even worse than simply rewarding harsh behavior, since the cycle of reward and punishment may make a person immune to rebuke, counseling, and discipline. Ignoring unacceptable behavior is only marginally better than rewarding it, but neither method changes behavior. Jane may punish Andy, but it probably won't change him. Rewarding Andy for excellent behavior may be more effective, especially if the specific behavior of Andy that is rewarded blocks the behavior Jane wants to change.

For example, Andy might be rewarded for mentoring that results in sensational performance by coworkers. In parallel, Andy might be shown that his mean behavior doesn't improve the performance of teammates—that he should affirm their good performance, instead. The best solution will be one that Andy helps to design, so long as it's fair to the rest of the team, even if it is just that Andy becomes an individual contributor.

Whatever happens, Jane needs to keep careful records and follow up. If it turns out that Andy should be fired, she needs backup plans. On the other hand, if Andy succeeds wonderfully, she should think about ways to reward his turnaround.