

THE RETAIL DOCTOR | BY BILLY CUTHRELL

Treating Staff Infections

You may have terrific employees and customers, but every once in a while, a store experiences staff infection. Serious staff infection starts when employees begin showing up late for work and stop caring about performance or appearance. This is accompanied by a sudden or unexplained inability to work with fellow employees, management and customers, as well as displays of poor judgment. The symptoms are hard to treat once it sets in, and the condition can worsen quickly and spread to others.

BEWARE OF EARLY SYMPTOMS

The common staff infection can exhibit a wide range of traits. In most cases, it's visible in small traces, such as an employee saying, "Today is laundry day, and I don't have a clean company shirt to wear," or "My guitar is in the back of my girlfriend's car, so I need to borrow a guitar from your inventory to teach my lessons."

Beware of these "once in a while" instances because they can signal the start of a trend that infects other employees and teachers. Then, those people will start saying, "If Steve gets to wear whatever shirt he wants, why do I have to wear a uniform every day?" You can stop this affliction from spreading to the entire staff by identifying and treating it early. Prompt treatment, in fact, is necessary because staff infection can turn into a staff epidemic.

Often misdiagnosed in younger employees or mistaken for a lack of training or experience, staff infections can be caused by a variety of sources, including, but not limited to, job burnout, drug or alcohol abuse, a change in marital status, death of a spouse, and any number of outside influences that you can't predict or change. In some cases, staff infection is contracted at another company that had poor procedures. These are things that will

surface down the road as the employee serves at your company for longer periods of time.

PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

Managers sometimes go overboard by placing tough rules and expectations on staff when treating this condition. This is not always the most effective treatment option. If, on occasion, one of my employees shows up wearing something other than the standard-issue company shirt,

we don't treat it as a big deal, as long as the clothes are work-place-appropriate. In many cases, simply taking an employee aside and addressing the issue directly is sufficient.

I've found that being direct at the time of hire is an effective pretreatment method. Lay out your expectations for every employee in writing — no exceptions. At my dealership, we have a detailed employee manual that works well, but you can also get away with a basic overview of your expectations.

Set a regular date and time for employee reviews, so you can meet with each person and review his or her work, discuss expectations, and consider solutions. Reviews are also a good time to treat any problems that might be lurking beneath the surface. Many potential staff infections in my business have been warded off with a private meeting.

You may never have to treat staff infection, especially if you run a business with a fun atmosphere where people have latitude and get positive reinforcement. After all, when you're accessible and visible in your workplace and have a clean, positive environment, you will attract clean, positive, honest, hard-working employees. **MI**

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Watch employee behavior for early warning signs, and take preventative action before it spreads