

Employer, cherish your talents!



Not a lot of research has been done into the connection between giftedness and the origin of work conflicts. From experience we know that conflicts between employers and gifted employees are not uncommon, and can lead to long-term absence or disability. What problems do you encounter with gifted employees? And what can you do as a manager to avoid these issues?

What is giftedness?

At the Gifted Adults Foundation we use the broad description that was drafted by a panel of twenty Dutch experts in 2008:

A quick and clever thinker, who likes to deal with complex matters. Autonomous, passionate and inquisitive. A sensitive and emotionally rich individual, living intensely. He or she enjoys being creative.

From: Kooijman - van Thiel, M.B.G M. *Hoogbegaafd, dat zie je zo! Over zelfbeeld en imago van hoogbegaafden.* * Ede, OYA Productions, 2008.

What is the difference between work conflicts regarding gifted and non-gifted employees?

There are a number of different factors that can lead to gifted employees not functioning well in the workplace, or that can lead to a conflict. Many times specific characteristics of the gifted employee play a role in this, even when the person in question may not always be aware of this. From a study done for the Gifted Adults Foundation a number of important characteristics for labor disputes emerged where gifted employees are concerned:

- Often it is a so-called 'cold' conflict. This means a difference of opinion on a business issue, not an emotional issue. This doesn't show in open confrontations, but develops in the background over a period of time.
- The communication is rational and focused on the issue.
- The cause of the conflict often lies in discontent concerning the work arrangements and processes of the organisation.

(See: Poster 'Of course I'm right!' Van der Waal et. al. 2013, on website IHBV)

Characteristics of a workplace conflict with a gifted person

It may be difficult to determine if a workplace conflict has to do with a person's giftedness or not. It can be useful to consider giftedness as a possible contributor to conflict when:

...the employee has a strong tendency to take on more work than the task he or she was appointed for.

Many gifted people have a problem doing routine work and as a consequence start to focus on tasks that are actually outside of their job description. This can cause the employee to develop ideas about the course of the company that the manager should be taking without being asked to do so.

...the employee has trouble following the agreements that were made or completing existing tasks.

Gifted people are often quick and creative thinkers. This can lead to a high output level, but also to a chaotic way of working and a frequent taking over of other tasks.

...the employee has little affinity with the existing company culture and hierarchy relations.

Many gifted people are strongly focused on the issue when they formulate their opinion, and as a result have little regard for formal authority relationships or work procedures, especially when these are not properly substantiated or seem to be ineffective.

...the employee will keep offering proposals and ideas, even though they have been rejected repeatedly.

Many gifted employees feel very involved with the official objectives of an organisation. They will often quickly develop an idea where the business can be more efficient, and will come up with proposals to improve this. Because these ideas are very clear and well substantiated to them, they can be very tenacious and uncompromising in this. Colleagues and managers may find this intrusive.

What can the manager do?

- Give a free rein. Many gifted employees will perform best when they are given some leeway in their work. Strict procedures and regular check-ups are counterproductive. So, if possible, review only the final result and not the process that led to that result.
- Set clear boundaries and agreements on how employees may organise their work. Put in writing the result you expect and what concrete objectives should be achieved.
- Communicate based on equality and stimulate cooperation and trust. Most gifted employees will work less effective when relationships are very hierarchical and don't respond well to a very competitive environment. A manager who positions him- or herself as a sparring partner and facilitates the employee, who motivates and gives feedback when necessary, is often more successful.
- Explain why you make certain choices. Give substantiated reasons when you don't follow an idea that an employee has and that he believes in very strongly. Explain what other interests there are and that you need to take these into account as a manager.
- If your employees have never considered that they may be gifted, but they are curious about it, point them in the direction of www.ihbv.nl/english/ – the website of the Gifted Adults Foundation. For many gifted people recognising themselves as gifted will help them deal with issues in their life and work. Sometimes a company physician or labor expert can help them.
- Don't wait too long to ask for mediation. Not all conflicts can be resolved internally. Mediators can contribute to identifying underlying tensions and start a dialogue.
- Don't forget that gifted employees can be of great value to an organisation. Their strong focus on the issues, their passion and eye for what is different and could be done better can provide a lot of useful information that will help the organisation to survive and innovate. Cherish this talent and try to put it to good use.

More recommendations can be found in the leaflet 'Gifted employees, good for business' (forthcoming).

* Gifted, obvious! On identity and self-image of Gifted Persons.