HRInsights

Dealing with a Passive-aggressive Employee

Handling a passive-aggressive employee can be exasperating for a manager or HR representative. Passive-aggressive behavior in the workplace can be disruptive, counterproductive and stressful, while impacting productivity and increasing work for others. This article discusses how to identify a passive-aggressive employee and steps a manager can take to handle the situation.

What is passive aggression?

Passive-aggressive behavior is a deliberate but indirect way of expressing anger and resistance. Though the person may seem to comply with expectations and be willing to complete tasks, he or she will underhandedly fail to fulfill their responsibilities or otherwise cause disruption or discord. The behavior may be targeted at one individual, such as a boss or co-worker, or more generally towards a department or the company. Because this behavior is subtle and often masked by an outwardly agreeable or charming persona, passive-aggressive behavior can be difficult to detect.

Recognizing Passive-aggressive Behavior

Passive-aggressive behavior can present itself in a host of different ways. A passive-aggressive employee may fit one of the following molds or may display multiple disruptive behaviors.

- **Temporary compliance**—This person will happily agree to a task, but delays completion by procrastinating, forgetting deadlines, misplacing documents, etc. Though the task may eventually get completed, the delay causes headaches for others.

- **Intentional inefficiency**—Work is completed, but full of intentional errors or omissions, often for the purpose of embarrassing a supervisor or making the team look bad. This can include conveniently losing a document or deleting part of a presentation and claiming technical problems. If confronted, this individual may say the task was too difficult and play the victim or shift the blame to others.

- **Deliberately undermining team projects**—Behavior may include withholding information, failing to remedy a mistake when noticed, taking a sick day right before a team project is due, being suddenly busy when someone needs help or other crimes of omission that set up the defense, "I didn't do anything!"

- **Sabotaging the boss**—Individuals may use any number of strategies to make the boss look bad, including spreading rumors and trying to turn others against the boss.

  - One form of this is creating a positive reputation for oneself by being charming and reliable to others but showing bad behavior only to the boss, so that when the boss complains others may not believe him or her.

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- Another method is to perform badly when the boss is around, but as soon as the boss is out, the individual invents a task that needs management approval and goes over the boss's head to get approval. Thus, to upper management, the person looks like a high performer who takes initiative, which may hurt the creditability of the boss's claims that the individual suffers in performance.
- **Engaging in immature behavior**—Including giving others the silent treatment, being compliant but with a sarcastic undertone, etc. This may also include complaining about the boss behind his or her back or constantly whining about being underappreciated or unhappy with certain tasks.
- **Stealing**—This may include taking office supplies, using company equipment or time to do personal work, etc.
- **Chronic tardiness and absenteeism**—This individual wants to send a message that the job isn't important, that others should wait on him or her, etc.

Handling Passive Aggression

Dealing with a passive-aggressive employee in the workplace is difficult, especially since the behavior is often masked and difficult to identify or prove. However, ignoring the behavior will not solve the problem; unless it is addressed, this individual is likely to cause continued disruption and frustration within the company or department. Consider the strategies below when handling a passive-aggressive employee.

- **Identify the type of passive-aggressive behavior being displayed**—Be observant and take notes of specific examples of unacceptable behavior. Document exactly what the person is doing and why it is not acceptable. Leave emotions out of it; simply gather facts. The issues you record should be having a negative effect on the success of your team, not simply personal annoyance.
- **Discreetly gather input from others**—If you notice a negative interaction between the individual and a

co-worker, ask the co-worker later if the issue was resolved. Ask if similar problems had happened before and direct the worker to report future issues to you. Do not add your own commentary or speak badly of the passive aggressor, just document facts.

- **Modify your interactions to address the behavior**—If you were able to pinpoint one or more specific types of bad behavior, find ways to change your interactions with that individual to counteract the behavior. For example, if the person takes too long to complete a project or makes intentional errors, change how you assign a new task. Offer specific written instructions and a timeline, and have the person send you an email relaying those instructions and due date in writing to demonstrate they understand your expectations.
- **Talk with the offender**—Share the specific facts and examples you have documented and declare that such negative behavior will not be tolerated. Allow the person to respond, but don't be surprised if he or she denies it or makes excuses. Don't be accusatory or overly sympathetic; stay calm, professional, pleasant and firm. Be specific about what will and will not be tolerated and what your expectations are for improvement. Emphasize that his or her performance and behavior must be changed.
- **Try to determine the root cause of the problem**—Employees generally act this way because of an underlying emotional catalyst (behavior disorder, prolonged grudge against an individual, perceived lack of recognition, being passed over for a promotion, etc.). Sometimes, addressing the root cause can improve the employee's behavior.
- **Going forward, monitor the employee carefully but do not mirror his or her bad behavior**—Be nice, but also firm in your expectations. Help the employee when needed, and make sure he or she has the resources needed and is clear on expectations. If you become hostile, the behavior will only worsen.
- **Be sure to keep upper management and HR informed throughout this process**—Make sure that everything is documented in order to protect yourself and the company.

If you have tried these strategies and the behavior continues to disrupt and hinder the performance of other employees, your team or the company, the only option may be termination.