

## Tips on Dealing with Difficult People

**B**ecause employees and managers have emotions, and because they must co-exist in the same workplace, conflicts are going to occur. The problem is, workers and bosses alike make workplace issues worse than they have to be. Situations often fester because we allow them to, rather than seeing the warning signs and nipping them in the bud.

Like wildfires, negativity may spread to the point where productive, happy employees are quitting in droves rather than dealing with constant turmoil. And even if they don't quit, morale and productivity will decline significantly, and businesses can't afford that in today's economic climate.

This month's article will address some of the key factors that can cause rampant negativity in work environments: pessimists, gossips, "toxic workplaces," and performance issues. Proactive ways to diffuse problems before they escalate include informal monthly lunch meetings, where supervisors, employees, and the EAP, can meet to discuss work issues, and offer feedback and suggestions. Additional ideas follow.

### Negativity Poses Problems

Workers with bad attitudes often lead to more negative employees. If you hang around with positive people, you're likely to have a positive outlook on life. However, if people who are real "downers" surround you at work, it's tough for even cheerful people to remain happy. This is why it's important to get to the root of problems before they get worse. Pessimists and gossips are among the most difficult people to deal with. The following sections examine these negative behaviors.

### Dealing with a Pessimist

No one likes pessimists very much, but workers and managers alike must be careful

to avoid the urge to dismiss their negative outlook entirely.

While focusing attention solely on the positive is certainly more enjoyable, it risks alienating a pessimist and making him/her feel even more negative. One of the problems with pessimists is their lack of specifics when they talk about what's bugging them. Carefully asking questions is a good start. When a pessimist starts to generalize, ask why and gently press for specifics and solutions. Consider the following scenario as an example:

Pessimist: *"There's no way that plan is going to work!"* You: *"Why do you say that?"* Pessimist: *"It's not realistic!"* You: *"In what way?"* Pessimist: *"The assumptions on which it's based are completely subjective. We don't have enough hard data."* You: *"Which assumptions in particular?"* Pessimist: *"The ones about housing trends in the young-adult market over the next two years."* You: *"How could we get better data?"*

As you can see, it's a matter of asking questions to turn generalizations into specifics – and to get the person engaged in solving the problem. As ideas and plans take shape, positive people often get carried away with enthusiasm – and they fail to see potential pitfalls that can hurt a plan as it's implemented. Guard against this by putting the pessimist to work in the role of a "healthy skeptic." Ask for candid feedback while things are still on the drawing board. Ask questions such as: *"What are we not considering?"* or, *"What could go wrong in implementation?"*

When the pessimist insists that things won't work, share one or two recent success stories as evidence that it just might be possible. If the person bemoans the fact that a team approach will take too much time, share the story about the team that used a "blitz" approach last year to complete their big project in one week.

## Office Gossip is Harmful

It's said that "loose lips sink ships," and most executives agree, a recent survey suggests. Eighty-four percent of marketing and advertising executives said it's common for employees to engage in office gossip, and nearly two-thirds (63%) said it has a negative effect on the workplace.

In fact, according to *Executive Reports*, "Sixty-five hours a year per employee are wasted gossiping about the workplace. Do the math and your manager will quickly see that the grapevine is an enormous money pit!"

Like negativity, unfounded rumors and gossip spread quickly and can be devastating – reputations can be damaged and people can even get fired before the truth is revealed. The trick lies in not letting yourself get sucked into the gossip vortex. If you're with a group, and the water-cooler conversation starts sounding like the *National Enquirer*, politely excuse yourself and walk away.

If you're willing to take a stand against gossip in the workplace, stay with the group and do your best to change the subject. Do it subtly though, there's nothing to be gained by turning this situation into a heated confrontation.

Here's one approach that can get a conversation back on course: "*You know, we probably shouldn't be talking about Robert when he's not here to give us his side of the story. When will we be seeing him next?*"

Be ready to offer your response if people are spreading rumors *about you*. You have to intervene – otherwise the stories will take on a life of their own. Approach the source of the stories in a civil way. Mention that you've heard the stories that are going around, and ask the person where they heard them and what they believe to be true. Use the conversation to state the facts. Ideally, try to include a few colleagues in this exchange. With some co-workers on hand, it will turn into a public clarification – perhaps even an apology.

Open communication is the best defense for an overactive rumor mill, according to Megan Slabinski with the Creative Group, which conducted the survey. "Sharing information quickly

and candidly can prevent employees from speculating," Slabinski noted.

The Creative Group offers these additional tips to help managers curb office gossip:

- ❖ **Check in regularly.** Visit one-on-one with staff members. Professionals may be more inclined to share concerns in an informal setting.

- ❖ **Keep doors open.** Workers become anxious when managers speak behind closed doors and in hushed tones. Try to maintain as much accessibility as possible. Consider discussing sensitive issues in less visible locations.

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- ❖ **Pick out bad apples.** If there's a single employee who continually spreads negative rumors or gossip, quickly address the issue with that person.

- ❖ **Lead by example.** Avoid saying anything about others that you wouldn't say to them personally. Let employees know that you expect the same of them.

If gossip and rumors continue to run rampant analyze why. Is internal competition pitting people against one another? Do workplace systems compel people to hoard data and resources?

In addition to pessimists and gossips – "toxic workplaces" and performance issues can also breed negativity. The next sections look at each:

## Toxic Workplaces

A "toxic" workplace is one that is vulnerable to hostility and violence generated from within.



As stated earlier, we're all human and a certain level of toxicity should be expected in any organization. However, "toxic" workplaces are more susceptible to problems. In these cases, there's an *increased likelihood* for a wide range of negative and inappropriate behavior. Characteristics of a "toxic" workplace include, but aren't limited to:

- Poor communication;
- Favoritism (see "Performance Issues" section); and/or
- Arbitrary and inconsistent decisions.

Certain workplace events may increase "toxicity" in the workplace. They include, but aren't limited to:

- Layoffs, downsizing, mergers;
- Significant increase in work demands; and/or
- Strikes or prolonged labor disputes.

It's worth noting that factors like these may not be acutely noted, but rather experienced as a gradual downturn in employee productivity and morale.

## Performance Issues

There's another form of negativity that poses problems: managers who treat certain employees with kid gloves compared to their co-workers. This is a sure-fire way to breed negativity, ill feelings, or worse. In many cases, this isn't a willful, discriminatory act. Rather, managers often allow performance issues to escalate into bigger problems over time. Consider the following:

Perhaps you work with an assistant manager who's out with a "headache" every other (non-payday) Friday, or an office receptionist who gets along well with co-workers, but who is sometimes surly with customers. The point is: these people aren't terrible employees – they're just not doing what they should be doing. The manager doesn't feel there's a need to fire them – but if he/she doesn't do *something*, their performance issues are sure to escalate until they become full-blown problem employees.

This is a problem that many supervisors and managers face. They are hesitant to deal with performance issues, so they send indirect messages and subtle signals, or they simply avoid the situation, hoping it will go away. As a result, the business's top performers – and whose behavior is consistent with company values – become increasingly resentful of co-workers who appear to be getting away with bad behavior or not doing their fair share of the work. The following is a suggestion to help boost the performance of substandard employees:

❖ **Don't let an employee's expertise or sales revenue translate into a "get-out-of-trouble-free card."** Allison isn't necessarily doing a good job just because she brought in a big account, or she does a great job updating the company website. If she's rude, arrogant, or condescending with co-workers, make no mistake – she is slowly poisoning your workplace. Is the money she's bringing in worth the disruption and resentment her behavior is causing among her co-workers? Probably not. The biggest challenge for management is to take corrective action with an employee that is a top producer, but whose behavior is not consistent with company values. If these standards are to have any real meaning, then *how* something gets done must be considered just as important as *what* gets done.

## Summary

It can be difficult to determine what is causing negative behavior in the workplace. However, rest assured that a decline in productivity and morale is probably a sign that *something* is going on. The EAP may need to help management dig deep to uncover root causes, but the effort is worth it. ■

*Additional sources: Tom Terez, author of "22 Keys to Creating a Meaningful Workplace," [www.BetterWorkplaceNow.com](http://www.BetterWorkplaceNow.com); Jennifer Forgie, managing partner with OnPoint Consulting, <http://onpointconsultingllc.com>; and Gerald Lewis, Ph.D., an international consultant on workplace violence, [www.geraldlewis.com](http://www.geraldlewis.com).*

## Conflict Resolution Strategies

❖ *The problem – one person versus the team:* This is usually a situation in which one person “loses control” when stressed. Over time, co-workers avoid giving feedback, fearing an angry reaction.

➤ *The resolution – involve the manager:* The best results occur when the manager participates in problem solving. The manager offers the missing feedback, lets the person know that he/she is having a negative effect on the team, and outlines a plan to improve performance. In this case, the plan includes seminars and visits for personalized education and coaching. Follow up with the manager is key, as is encouraging people to come back for additional coaching if needed.

❖ *The problem – two individuals who can't get along:* Misunderstandings occur, negative assumptions are formed, and both people conclude that the other person is “not a team player.” They spend time talking to other co-workers about how difficult it is to work with him/her, avoid each other, and the conflict creates a negative environment for everyone.

➤ *The resolution – solicit the help of a facilitator:* When EA professionals are asked to facilitate these matters; it is usually only after

higher levels in the organization and/or HR have been involved. Record what the team sees as the positives and negatives of the current situation. Then, outline a “desired state” for the team, listing positive behaviors and the resulting positive environment. The final step is for the team to create guidelines that will improve the working relationship. Instruction on how to listen or give feedback may be necessary. Follow up is a shared responsibility among the team, the team leader, and the manager of the department.

*Source: Joan Murray, MBA and development specialist.*



## Important Traits for Resolving Conflicts

The following are among the important traits of managers and employees who understand how to resolve conflicts effectively:

1. **They understand the individual's needs.** Does the person need to vent? Brainstorm solutions? Effective conflict resolvers know what both parties want, and if they don't, they find out.
2. **They are collaborative listeners.** Listening is crucial, but effective conflict resolvers take it a

step further and support the other person. As with point #1, the individual needs to feel heard.

3. **They are more interested in a good solution, than a hasty one.** Effective conflict resolvers recognize that while it's important to not drag one's feet, neither do you want to be so anxious for a resolution that you'll settle for anything. Do that and you'll simply revisit the issue later. ■

*Source: Dina Beach Lynch, former ombudsman for Fleet Bank.*