

Managing Passive-Aggressive Behavior

Definition

Passive-Aggressive behavior is characterized by passivity and aggression in which forceful actions or attitudes are expressed in an indirect, nonviolent manner, such as pouting, obstructionism, procrastination, inefficiency, stubbornness, and forgetfulness.

Sugar-Coated Hostility

Often include crimes of omission – for example, regularly having trouble meeting deadlines at work, being angry at someone and refusing to tell them why, “inadvertent” barbs which repeatedly hurt others, and acting like a team player but covertly undermining team efforts.

Someone exhibiting this behavior will take out their resentment passively, without indicating that they view you as the enemy.

Passive-Aggressive Behaviors

Channel aggression or anger into passive behavior that slows down, blocks or “stonewalls” the efforts of co-workers.

- Stubbornness
- Inordinate dependency
- Forgetfulness
- Dawdling
- Procrastination
- Slamming doors
- Inward resentments
- Obstructionism
- Deep sighs
- Silent treatment
- Acting helpless
- Acting hurt
- Long coffee breaks
- Absenteeism
- Incongruent verbal / non-verbal
- Intentional inefficiency
- Late-coming
- Sullenness
- Misunderstanding
- No carry-over learning
- Back stabbing
- Covert questioning
- 3rd party griping
- “Inadvertent” barbs
- Sniping
- Somatic complaints
- Pouting
- Petty thievery
- Poor quality work
- Lack of loyalty

Danger

Diagnosing

Avoid using clinical terms such as “passive-aggressive personality.” Rather, focus on specific problem behaviors.

Taking Behavior Out of Context

Look for patterns. We all have bad days or weeks, and may exhibit out-of-character behaviors which could be considered passive-aggressive. Verify patterns before intervening.

Over-Simplifying

Identified problem behaviors can also be present with depression, grief reactions, health problems and many other conditions.

Labeling

Using negative labels create over-generalizations of a person. This can lead to negative assumptions which limit intervention options.

Goals When Confronting Passive-Aggressive Behavior

Do Not

Don't confront general behavior without examples to back it up.

Do Not Get Riled, Angry or Act Sensitive or Hurt

Some passive-aggressors enjoy producing anxiety or defensiveness. Your distress reinforces passive-aggressive behavior.

Do Not Argue

Stick to your observations of behavior patterns.

Do Not Ignore the Behavior Once a Pattern is Established

Tolerance is a recipe for escalation and tacitly condoning behavior. It's tempting to ignore the situation, take whatever performance you can get and devote your attention to other staff members who don't carry such emotional baggage. However, the more the passive aggressor gets away with, the more likely it is that the pattern will continue. By tolerating behavior you condone it, which may erode your ability to manage your staff.

Do

Be certain in your own mind that you are dealing with a passive-aggressive behavior pattern and that your relationship will not improve if left alone. Seek input from the EAP or Human Resources.

Unfortunately, while passive-aggressive behavior patterns stand out in hindsight, is it not all that easy to identify at the time. It takes time to see a pattern or realize that there may be a deliberate strategy involved.

Observe and Document Behaviors

If the employee has established a pattern of passive-aggressive behavior, it will become clear through documentation (rule in or rule out).

Written documentation of your observations is important when people resist or refute feedback.

Consult

Inform your supervisor of the problem.

While you may not want to bother the boss with trivial problems, you owe it to him/her to inform them of a situation which may lead to discipline. He/she may be able to offer assistance, or at least back you up if you take corrective action. Consultation with an EAP can be helpful.

Confront Behavior without Acrimony, Contempt or Defensiveness

Point out the behavior you believe is unacceptable and how it is having a negative effect.

Stress that you want the situation to improve. Ask for suggestions. Don't hesitate to tell an employee that while he/she professes cooperation, honesty and loyalty, his/her actions say something altogether different.

Set Clear, Realistic, Fair and Enforceable Limits

Specify what behaviors will and will not be accepted.

Self-awareness is important, as the purpose of an intervention is not to punish or to ventilate your own anger. Limits must not be set unless the manager intends to follow through with the process. To avoid misunderstanding, have the employee repeat elements of the intervention plan.

Positive Reinforcement

Acknowledge and support appropriate, direct, and healthy expressions of anger.

Allow employees to express negative feelings about limits beings set. Encourage direct communication with yourself and other employees.

Prevention Strategies

Institute grievance procedures or other formats for employees to air what isn't working for them in the organization.

Intervention Example – Sniping Behavior

Sniping behavior is when an employee hides in the camouflage of social restraint, takes careful aim, and just at the right moment, verbally or non-verbally expresses criticism, sarcasm or contempt.

Take away the camouflage by bringing attention to the sarcasm. Bring the grievance to the surface. Identify specific legitimate concerns. When there is a legitimate problem, deal with it.

Possible Responses:

- “Rick, when you said _____, it sounded like sarcasm. Is that what you meant?”
- “Rick, this is the second time you made a sarcastic remark, what’s going on?”
- “I know it was funny, but I thought I heard a dig... Did I?”
- “In fact, I wondered if there was a dig in what you said. I wanted to know if you meant it that way.”