

Successful Supervisor Part 33

Passive Aggressive

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I have mentioned all kinds of difficult employees in this series, but as yet I have not mentioned the “Passive Aggressive.” On Wikipedia, the malady is describes as “the indirect expression of hostility, such as through procrastination, stubbornness, sullen behavior, or deliberate or repeated failure to accomplish requested tasks for which one is (often explicitly) responsible.”

For a supervisor, dealing with a passive aggressive is particularly challenging because this individual will eventually do the work requested, but the supervisor has to deal with a lot of pushback and rotten attitudes on a continual basis. This employee has a kind of disease that is like a cancer that will spread if left unchecked.

If the passive aggressive employee was operating in a vacuum, the supervisor might be able to endure the strain, but the impact this type of employee has on the whole team becomes a huge impediment to the culture of the organization, and thus he or she must be dealt with effectively.

To give you a sense of what a passive aggressive employee might sound like, consider a situation where the supervisor is trying to create some energy to tackle a particularly challenging task for her team. The passive aggressive might listen with a bored look on his face and then utter one of his favorite expressions: “Whatever...” Let’s look at some tips for dealing with a passive aggressive (PA) personality.

Tips for Supervisors

Call them on it

The PA employee appears to be uncooperative as a way of gaining attention. His ultimate goal is often to skate the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior with great care to remain employed but still make life miserable for his supervisor. If she would simply indicate that his pushback has become an unacceptable level, then the PA employee is likely to change behavior, at least temporarily.

Once a change in attitude is obvious, the supervisor can give gentle but not effusive praise. In some cases, this shift in feedback is enough to make a more lasting shift. If the employee falls back into a pattern of PA behavior, the supervisor can say something

like, “Oh, you were doing so well with a more positive attitude; let’s not slip backward at this point.”

Take a direct approach

With some people, a direct approach of a heart to heart discussion with the employee will work. Simply point out your observations and let the employee know you are not going to tolerate his antics. In some situations that will be enough to bring the employee around.

You can ask the employee for help because of the negative effect his passive aggressive behavior is having on the operation. In taking this approach, refrain from threatening the employee with an “or else” statement; simply put the request out there and appeal to his nobler side.

Work on Accountability

I have written extensively on Accountability [earlier in this series](#), so I will not repeat the ideas here, but in the accountability discussions, the supervisor can gain some leverage with a passive aggressive. Stress that it isn’t enough to be accountable for the work getting done. Each person needs to realize that he or she has an impact on other people as well.

The PA employee can reduce the effectiveness of any group by lowering the morale of everyone. That action will lower productivity and cause missed commitments. A process of peer pressure that sends a signal of unwillingness of the group to let the PA employee hamper the success of the group can be very helpful.

Don’t Accept Excuses

Part of the way a PA employee gets to slack off without repercussions is to make lame excuses for not doing what was expected. The supervisor can thwart this kind of behavior by simply refusing to accept excuses for poor or late work. Just be alert to the words being used by the employee and when the word “because” comes up, make a statement that you are not going to tolerate it.

Simply blow by the excuse as if it was not even stated, and get back to the requirements. Soon, the PA employee will realize that the ploy does not work with you and stop trying to use it. Be vigilant, because he will continue to test you periodically to see if he can wear you down. The message needs to be that missed deadlines are not erased by cooking up some reason why the problem was not the employee’s fault.

Focus on reality

The PA employee lives in a kind of fantasy world of his own making. You can bring the conversation back to reality by simply restating the requirements. If the employee is resistant to this approach simply state “The situation is XYZ and you need to do ABC now.” You can also spell out the consequences of not complying with duties.

Hide Your Goat

Often the passive aggressive employee is just trying to push your buttons to see how far he can go before you get rattled. Basically, he is trying to “get your goat” to see what you will do about it. Steve Gilliland, an acquaintance from the National Speaker’s Association, suggests that you can simply hide your goat.

You need to refuse to get upset and just turn the negative energy back at the employee with a comment like, “I know what you are doing, and it is not going to have any impact except to make you look immature in the eyes of your friends.” Now you are using a form of peer pressure to bring the employee back into line.

Confirm Established Goals

The PA employee is compromising the ability of the group to accomplish its goals. Point out that there is no relief from the pressures on the organization, and that the entire team is responsible for meeting the goals. Point out the employee’s contribution to the common goal and relate the situation to a sports analogy where the entire team needs to perform well for the mission to be accomplished.

Working with an employee who uses passive aggressive tendencies can be exasperating, but you ultimately can control the behavior and shape it to be acceptable. Use the tips in this article to help you win the battle and remain in control.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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