Surviving Those Passive-Aggressive Employees

They botch work—but in ways so subtle that a manager can’t quite say how. Recognizing their tactics is half the battle.

YOU KNOW the type: The employee who always does what you ask, seems eager to help, never raises his voice, never even complains. But somehow an important part of the work doesn’t get done. He always has an excuse, and after the third time, your blood starts to boil. You are desperate to take a swift and terrible managerial action that will guarantee this never happens again. But when it comes to figuring out what actually went wrong, you can’t quite put your finger on it.

It’s the classic scenario of the passive-aggressive—someone who feels hostile toward authority but is scared to show it directly. He (or she) is passive in that he doesn’t act or speak out openly, and aggressive because his anger needs to come out somehow. It’s the “somehow” that’s the problem. He undermines performance but in a way that’s so indirect you find it next to impossible to hold him accountable. His tactics may include withholding information, being chronically late or otherwise failing to meet your expectations.

PAVING THE PATHWAY TO HELL

To cope, managers often choose one of two painful routes: Some respond by driving themselves crazy with self-recrimination: “If only I’d been clearer in my instructions.” “I should have come down harder the last time something like this happened.” “I must not be a good motivator.” Since the manager can’t find anything wrong with her employee, she blames herself—and the problem never gets solved.

Other managers try confronting the employee with his screw-ups—an event the expert passive-aggressive is ready for. He may respond by looking offended at your lack of sympathy and asking, “What in the world did I do? I was only trying to help.” Or he’ll offer excuses: “I forgot.” “I’d have gotten the report done if you hadn’t kept interrupting me.” “The traffic was incredible.” “You never told me to do that.” Passive-aggressives prefer excuses to sincere apologies or admitting they’re wrong. At this point the frustrated manager is likely to respond by throwing a temper tantrum.

Beth Wolffe, a labor attorney with Seyfarth, Shaw, Fairweather & Geraldson, in Washington, DC, tells of watching a manager explode while discussing a production schedule with a passive-aggressive employee who always did exactly what she was told—but not one drop more. “Are we going to go on like this forever?” the manager hollered. “I don’t think you can fire me for being polite to you!” the subordinate said quietly. The manager was left feeling helpless, Wolffe says. The problem couldn’t be solved because the passive-aggressive had hidden it behind a veil of good intentions and plausible excuses.
MANAGING SMART

The manager blew up, while the passive-aggressive became self-righteous and defensive.

ANGER ARMOR

Passive-aggressives are good at deflecting anger because they are so afraid of it. “They even deceive themselves into think-

DON’T BLAME ME—I JUST WORK HERE

Often it’s hard to tell, when someone messes up, if he or she is passive-aggressive or just plain incompetent. Here are some guidelines to help you tell the difference:

1. Disregard the person’s stated good intentions. Focus on actual behavior. Instead of thinking, “Robert tried to get the report in on time,” think, “Robert passed the report in two days late.”

2. Look for patterns. Is the problem chronic or temporary? Most people occasionally use passive-aggressive behavior as a coping mechanism. But some people consistently upset and undermine coworkers. Does the person habitually procrastinate, work at a snail’s pace or sulk when given an unglamorous assignment?

3. Listen to your own emotions and intuition. Psychologist Scott Wetzler thinks your feelings make better antennae for passive-aggression than your intellect. Watch for your own “sense of irritation, feeling let down, losing your patience.” Does the person put you in the wrong? Do you ever feel guilty, as if you’re asking too much?

4. Evaluate the aftermath of the person’s mistakes:
   - Does the person make it hard to hold him responsible for his failings?
   - Who pays the price? Does the person have accidents that seem to always spill on other people? Do you find yourself saying: “It’s easier just to do it myself,” or “Let’s give that project to Ellen—she always comes through”?
   - Some passive-aggressive people say over and over, “I forgot.” Try substituting, in your mind, “I didn’t want to,” whenever he or she says, “I forgot.” Does it sound more plausible?
   - Find someone to test your perceptions on—your own boss, a trusted colleague, a mentor, a psychologist you can consult briefly. Managers have to pass judgment on the validity of repeated excuses. You’ll be more confident of your assessment with a second opinion, and that increased confidence will help you take appropriate action.

DON’T BLAME ME—I JUST WORK HERE

Many work organizations, especially highly bureaucratic or down-

JUST WORK HARDER

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sizing ones, foment passive-aggression because they don’t provide a safe way for people to express their dissent.

- Don’t get into arguments over whose fault it is. Avoid showing your temper. The passive-aggressive loves to see you upset. In an argument, he’ll probably get the best of you; he’s been fine-tuning his technique for years. Also, don’t tell him he’s passive-aggressive.

- He’ll feel threatened by the label, and he probably won’t understand what you mean.
- Keep written records. Write up each conversation as a memo. Send a copy to your boss. You can refer to these copies later when the passive-aggressive says, “You didn’t tell me.” You’ll also have documentation in the event termination becomes necessary.
- Talk positively. Assume that the person is doing his or her best and shares your interest in the unit’s success. Say, “Let’s talk about how we’re going to guarantee a successful result.” Discuss each episode of success and failure with the person. Include some praise in your talk, even if you have to go back a year. “Remember how well you handled the McDonald account?” Help this person maintain his shaky self-esteem. His own sense of inadequacy fuels his anger at you.

Unless you’re the CEO, you probably can’t change the entire company, but you can bring significant improvement to the area you manage directly.

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