



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

By Lynne Gaines

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 driv-

ing 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

fer 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



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 pre-

fer 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.

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-

ing they harbor no aggressive feelings," psychiatrist Willard Gaylin writes in his book *The Rage Within*. "They are amazed that they are so often misunderstood. They don't understand why everyone is always so angry with them. 'What in the world did I do?' is emblazoned on their escutcheons."

Instead of fuming or raging, managers can learn to recognize passive-aggressive behavior and then take control. Keep in mind that nearly everyone is passive-aggressive once in a while: neglecting to return a phone call, procrastinating, making promises we don't intend to keep. Some people, however, make it an integral part of their personality, using passive-aggressive tactics repeatedly and frequently. And thanks to downsizing, passive-aggressive behavior is on the rise. New York City-based clinical psychologist Scott Wetzler, who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of passive-aggressives, calls it the strategy of the 90s. These days, he says, it really can be dangerous to express your anger to a manager who may be deciding on her A-list as you speak. But no matter how hard anyone tries to conceal aggressive feelings, they come out somehow.

SETTING THINGS RIGHT

If you find you are often angry at a poorly performing subordinate, and you believe he or she has the brainpower to do the job, take action:

- **Create a written list of specific expectations.** Not meeting your expectations is what a passive-aggressive thrives on. But when you give him or her a clear and detailed list, it's harder for the person to claim not to have

known what was expected. Break assignments down into small pieces; give each part an absolute deadline, and check on its completion.

- **Lay out the consequences.** Decide what you can enforce. Then state it clearly: "If you can't meet the deadline on the Smith case, we'll move you back to support work."

Until you've seen improvement, don't set yourself up by relying on this person in critical situations.

- **Watch your own behavior.** Do you sometimes model a passive-aggressive style? Look back to the last few times you were angry with a coworker. Did you say something directly to the person, or did you hold it in and get back at him or her somehow? Be honest in assessing yourself, says psychologist Hendrie Weisinger, author of *Anger at Work*. "Don't ask what you would do, but what you did do," he says. Try to teach and model constructive approaches to anger. Talk to people who report to you about situations in which you felt angry and how you handled them.

- **Look for the useful message.** Does your subordinate have a legitimate grievance? Passive-aggressive behavior gets worse when people feel they have no other safe option for expressing disagreement. Make it easy for people to tell you directly when something's troubling them. Praise people who give you honest input, even if you disagree. Dig a little. Say, "I thought you looked unhappy when we announced the new reimbursement procedure. What did you think?" Follow up on what they tell you. Many work organizations, especially highly bureaucratic or down-

DON'T BIAME 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?

- 5 **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.

BRIEFCASE READINGS

REAL TIME STRATEGIC CHANGE

by Robert W. Jacobs (Berrett-Koehler)

"Corporate change efforts often fizzle after the first waves of motivational speeches. This book shows you how to avoid go-nowhere strategic change. The key is to get everyone involved. Jacobs leads you step-by-step through the design of a strategic change event and provides case studies. I use Jacobs's approach because getting everyone involved creates the energy, excitement and follow-through necessary to make change happen."

MILA BEGUN, president, Workwise, an organizational change and career management firm



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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Managing Part-Timers and Temps

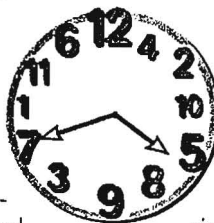
Whole new types of employees and working arrangements are emerging to fill the void created by downsizing. Today's effective manager needs an additional set of skills to manage in this nontraditional work arrangement maze. And while many employees may be grateful for the opportunity to work an alternative schedule (and therefore motivated to make the arrangement mutually beneficial), your job is necessarily harder when staff members' schedules stray from the traditional 9 to 5.

For one thing, you need to be more organized because you can no longer stick your head out your office door and yell for Janet. She's as likely to be gone as to be around. That means you have to know in advance what you want to tell Janet when you see her.

By following a few basics and practicing flexibility, you'll be better prepared to keep your department on track, no matter when your employees get their jobs done.

One size doesn't fit all.

The old saw that you treat all employees alike no longer applies here. Because they are around less, part-timers and temps are more likely to miss changes in priorities or important nuances of company culture that can affect how things get done. Regularly check your assumptions about how well these employees understand priorities, organizational objectives and their own jobs. Ask them what they want and need to be more productive members of your team.



Focus on project management. Rather than assign a part-timer or temp 12 unrelated tasks, give her a specific, structured project. You'll spend less time directing and

delegating (and tracking her progress). Be very specific about the direction you want the project to take since there will be less opportunity to compare notes as the project proceeds.

Avoid having part-timers become full-time headaches.

Don't assign your part-time staffers to back corners or cubbyholes that no one else wants because they aren't "real" employees. And don't presume they won't require special training and equipment like everyone else—not if you want them to be productive. Part-timers need the same equipment, training and attention as any employee, relative to the hours they work.

Sharpen your communication.

Because part-timers are just that, you have to be more conscious of the need for effective internal communications. Treating a part-timer as invisible because she isn't always there or failing to build her into the team plans means you'll get less cooperation.

You may also have to take extra steps, like reminding full-timers of a part-timer's role on a project or seeking out a part-timer when you need her. Phrases like "You're never around when I need to talk to you," are not constructive in managing part-time workers. ►