

TITLE: Dealing with Behavior Issues –in the Team

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Similar “Breeds” in Every Hospital

Have you ever caught yourself experiencing this situation?

Our team really isn't a team. They aren't working together and they actually seem to be working against each other! They are more worried about what everyone else is NOT doing rather than doing their job. It is so bad that client and patient service is being compromised because they are holding back and waiting for the other person to step up and do it as a way to 'teach them a lesson' and get them to work more!!

Other situations may be: missing deadlines, showing up late, making excuses, muttering to co-workers and claiming that others are being unreasonable (Kets de Vries). If any of these sound familiar, you may have been bitten by the passive-aggressive “breed” in your hospital. They outwardly agree to work as a part of a team (receptionist team, surgery team), but they covertly undermine goals and exhibit offensive actions toward another team member. Their resentment may be directed at peers or authority figures, whomever their target, they express their resentment is seemingly non-aggressive behaviors that harm team morale, client service and patient service.

As with our evaluation of a pet behavior problem, it is not always just the pet, it can be the family or environment; do not ignore looking at the culture of the business and actions by management. More specifically, is the management team enabling the passive-aggressive behavior? Review the following list (Whipple) to see if you may be part of the behavior problem:

- You walk around the “problem” by coming up with creative workaround techniques or thinking it will eventually correct itself if you wait long enough
- You fear being accused of playing favorites if you correct one person for something but not another person
- The SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) are not followed, not enforced and there are no repercussions for ignoring them
- Management talks about how to handle the “problem person” without ever taking action - hoping that “someone” in management will handle it
- You downplay the issues and even fear retaliation by thinking that you will do more harm than good by confronting the behavior
- Cliques form to protect certain people or groups
- There are people in your practice who are victims of pranks or are ostracized by others

If you are nodding your head and realizing your actions (or inactions) are enabling the passive-aggressive behavior to continue, then you are on the road to successfully dealing with the passive-aggressive person or people on your team.

Treating the Behavior without Harming the Person or Team

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Recall the “old” way of handling a soiling accident by a dog - rub their nose in it and throw them outside! Should you handle the passive-aggressive employee the same way? Rub their nose in it (call them out in public) and terminate them! Simply firing them should not be the one and only action...especially if the culture is one that enables that type of behavior. Although termination may be necessary, some passive-aggressive behaviors (especially if identified and addressed early on) can be resolved. Kets de Vries offers some techniques for dealing with this type of behavior:

- Do not argue; do not correct them when they deny the behavior. Passive-Aggressives think they are victims. (Ex: the receptionist who does not answer the ringing phone because they have answered the last five calls while the other receptionist has just sat around playing on the computer).
- Point out the inconsistencies in their behavior (they will deny this). (Ex: the tech who pushes for optimum and timely care of hospitalized patients yet arrives late to work when scheduled to work with a certain person(s)).
- Express disappointment by their behavior, even telling them you are confused by their behavior, and asking them why they are doing it. (Consider using the “I” statement: “I feel _____ when you _____ because it causes/results in _____”).
- Accept their defensiveness for a short time - giving them the opportunity to reflect on your comments (if they do not improve then it is time to terminate them).
- Acknowledge their strengths. Sometimes, the passive-aggressive person has low self-esteem and we all know that not feeling appreciated is one of the top reasons for employee job dissatisfaction. (“I value your _____(skill)_____ and I know you are committed to _____.” (ex: I value the way you organize treatment for hospitalized patients so that nothing is missed and everything is documented. I know you are committed to taking care of those sick pets....”)).
- Encourage transference of their hostility - bring the conflict out into the open. Get them to acknowledge the issue and solve the problem. (“Sue, it seems to me that you are angry at me.” “I handed out a memo about steps to take when dealing with angry clients, but I wonder if there are more ideas being thought of. Do you have any new ideas?”).
- Get certain agreements in writing - especially if they tend to procrastinate or sabotage initiatives (ex: Distribute a new SOP to each person with a section to sign their name and jot down any other ideas they have for making the SOP even more effective).

The ROI - Return on Your Efforts

We all know that, with persistence and proper techniques, behavior issues can be turned around. However, we also know that some problems persist and a resolution is not possible. Unresolved behavior undermines productivity of the business, lowers team morale, and adversely affects the control and credibility of those in leadership roles (Whipple).

Since culture always trumps strategy, it is necessary to identify passive-aggressive behavior and take steps to resolve the issue. Think about what behaviors need to be stopped, needs to be started and needs to be continued. What behaviors support the type of culture that makes a business a great place to work? Coffee and Jones (2013) listed six imperatives for a great work environment - consider how these imperatives can help you deal with team behavior problems:

- Let them be themselves - create a psychologically safe environment to think differently, make suggestions and talk about their passions for patient and client service

- Encourage the flow of information - being able to discuss concerns, being told all of the information, having open communication
- Magnify strengths - encourage skills and knowledge development for every team member (not just a select few), show value for each individual's strengths, fairly compensate or reward
- Instill pride - what the practice stands for, the importance of positively impacting the community
- Ensure that daily work is meaningful - every person performs an important job, duties make sense and everyone understands how their responsibilities fit in with everyone else's, the team shares a common cause
- Prevent bureaucratic creep - keep SOPs simple, clear and applied equally; respect authority and clearly explain what the rules are for

The ultimate ROI for resolving passive-aggressive behavior is that your team will be happier, work better as a team and become more productive. Happy employees means happy clients because the client is not suffering from the effects of employee negative behavior. Happy employees, happy clients...can easily translate into better patient care. When you consider the inter-related groups in your circle of care the other "group" being impacted is the business and business success.

Passive-aggressive is just one of many "breeds" of behavior presented in the workforce. Facing the behavior, rather than ignoring it, will change the culture and improve the work environment. And who doesn't appreciate a great place to work?

Resources

Goffee, R. and Jones, G. (May, 2013). *Creating the Best Workplace on Earth*. Harvard Business Review, 99-106.

Kets de Vries, Manfred F.R. (April, 2014). *Coaching the Toxic Leader*. Harvard Business Review, 101-109.

Whipple, Robert T. (September, 2010). *Stop the Enabling*. HR Magazine, 114-115.