Dealing with Passive-Aggressive Team Members

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You are working in your practice, assuming all team members are happy and satisfied, when you notice some subtle but inappropriate behaviors. Your typically helpful assistant is now mysteriously rarely available. The tools you need are inexplicably missing. Team members are switching shifts to avoid working together or formerly friendly colleagues are giving each other the silent treatment. There are signs of discord and drama in your usually stable team, and although you are having difficulty pinpointing the source, something definitely is wrong.

Passive-aggressive behavior may be sabotaging the practice.

Passive-aggressive behavior is defined in Merriam-Webster's dictionary as "behavior characterized by the expression of negative feelings, resentment, and aggression in an unassertive passive way (as through procrastination and stubbornness)." The behavior is often dismissed or viewed by other team members as an oversight or an honest mistake, which can perpetuate the problem. Some passive-aggressive team members may be oblivious to the effect their behavior has on the team, but many are deliberately acting this way. Rooting out this behavior is difficult because it is often intentionally disguised and seldom blatant. Denial is easy when there are no witnesses.

Your challenge as manager is finding the source of the passive-aggressiveness and correcting the behavior. The problem person may be a team member who is excellent at his or her job but who strongly resists any new or changed processes, or an individual who demeans others in ways that border

on malicious; for example, a team member who says to a new assistant, *You did that almost as well as Jane*, or responds, *I'm coming*, when asked to help in an examination room but never comes.

"Passive-aggressive behavior often arises when an individual feels powerless and lacks a strong voice in a challenging environment," says Preston Ni, a professor of communication and professional coach.[1] Team members who are faced with changes they feel were made without their participation are most likely to exhibit passive-aggressive behavior. Their actions are their way of trying to regain control of a situation or protest their forced participation.

Fear is behind most negative actions, including passive-aggressiveness.

Personal Experience

Here is an example of the author using humor to diffuse a difficult situation.

I noticed that one of my customer service representatives (CSRs) had changed her behavior toward me and become closed-off, when we used to have a normal, friendly relationship. I called her aside and asked what was bothering her. She confessed that she thought I was scheming to push her out of her job because I had hired several younger people. I was astonished, as she was an amazing CSR. I shook my head and said, "Jo, I am just not that deep." She looked at me, realized that I was joking but also being completely honest, and we moved on.

This technique can also be used with clients. When an owner says something like, "This dog is costing me a fortune; his medication is so expensive," I agree with her. Then I say, "Yes, but look at it this way—he never talks back and you will never have to buy him a car. And thank you for being such an excellent owner."

Humor is a good way to refuse to play the negativity game.

When a Team Member Disrupts the Team

How do you deal with a team member's disruptive behavior? Here are some tips.

- **Trust the Team**

  Management may have inadvertently triggered the issue by not asking for feedback from the team. Owners and managers often make changes to protocols, products, and schedules without getting input from those most directly affected. Smart managers involve the team by explaining the need for change and how the change will be helpful. A team or individual team member may become dysfunctional when they feel an absence of trust, no matter how subtle.[2]

- **Start a Discussion**

  Open a dialogue with the team member, using open-ended questions to uncover his or her feelings. People usually want to avoid conflict and confrontation, but asking the right questions will likely uncover the problem. For example, ask, *Lisa, can you tell me how you felt when we changed your job duties?* and *What could we have done so we did not make you feel that way?* A resolution will probably be obvious once the problem is out in the open.

- **React the Right Way**

  Fear is behind most negative actions, including passive-aggressiveness. As manager, using your knowledge of behavior and taking an analytical approach will allow you to step back from the situation and find the best way to handle the problem. For example, your gut reaction may be that the individual is deliberately trying to undermine your authority. However, if you diagnose the situation and analyze the behavior using the same skills you use to diagnose a patient's illness, you may see the team member's reaction is caused by fear of the team's perceived disrespect, or because he or she no longer feels safe and secure about his or her job. Then the individual's reaction (ie, his or her passive-aggressive behavior) can be addressed without emotions skewing perceptions.

■ **Do Not Feed the Flame**

Stay out of the drama and do not retaliate passive-aggressively yourself. The passive-aggressive team member wants to get under your skin, and you let him or her "win" when you respond in kind. If possible, show the individual how his or her performance is actually harming, not helping the practice team. When you can show the passive-aggressive colleague how his or her refusal to follow a new protocol is actually upsetting other team members and making life more difficult because one person is not following practice protocol, the behavior usually stops.

■ **Keep Track**

Make sure, as manager, that the individual's behavior is tracked and recorded in detail. The practice's protocols should include a statement about behavior that is unacceptable and the disciplinary actions to be taken as needed.

When a Team Member Disrupts Management

When passive-aggressive conduct is targeted at management, confirm that other team members are seeing what you see. Peer pressure from a team that sets open communication and positivity as its norms can be a strong deterrent to inappropriate behavior.

Also, telling a joke can diffuse tense situations and disarm a passive-aggressive colleague, because humor shows you were not affected by the comment or situation and you can stay cool and calm. (See **Personal Experience**.)

Open communication is also key to stopping the gossip spiral that often accompanies passive-aggressive remarks. If your team knows you stayed until 10 PM several nights to work on a special project, they will likely defend you when a passive-aggressive team member remarks that you never work late.

Conclusion

Any practice team member who is the target of passive-aggressive behavior must report the activity so that it can be corrected early. Chronic hostility, no matter how subtle, takes a toll on not only the team but also the practice culture and such behavior should never be accepted.

"Some people try to be tall by cutting off the heads of others." — Paramhansa Yogananda

References
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2. Lencioni P. *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 2002:188.

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FUN FACT: Debbie is a neuroscience geek and loves to read books about how our brains work.

TAKE ACTION

1 Know how to recognize team members' passive-aggressive behavior and take corrective action early because chronic hostility can harm the team and interfere with practice culture.

2 Include unacceptable behaviors in the practice protocols, as well as disciplinary measures to be taken when necessary.