

MANAGING NEGATIVE EMPLOYEES AND OTHER ENERGY SUCKERS

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They're here, there, everywhere. They upset managers and fellow employees--even themselves. Who are "they?" If you haven't already guessed, "they" are the negative employees most people encounter in the workforce at some point. If not carefully managed, they can suck the energy out of your business or your personal life.

What is a negative employee? They are people with poisonous attitudes and behavior patterns who negatively influence the people around them. Negative workers come in various shapes and sizes. Sometimes they spread rumors, gossip about coworkers or bad mouth their superiors to their faces and behind their backs. Basically they are unhappy people who resist the positive efforts of others.

Managers often hesitate to terminate them if they are productive or have special skills/experience. Sometimes managers do not understand the amount of stress a negative employee creates. It may be hard to accept that a negative employee who did a good job did so at the expense of the productivity of others. Yet ignoring or tolerating the problems and atmosphere they create can easily and quickly result in dissatisfaction among other employees.

What can a supervisor/manager do when faced with this unpleasant situation?

First, analyze the situation. How much does the person contribute to the overall success of the office/department/business? How much does the person contribute to the unhappiness of other employees? How does that unhappiness translate into reduced productivity and enthusiasm? How much of your time as a manager are you using to control the situation? What are the legal ramifications (if any) of discharging the employee?

Second, plan a course of action. If you decide to try to salvage the employee, with termination only as a last resort, consider these tips:

Discuss the situation with the employee. The employee will probably profess ignorance of any problems, acknowledge the situation but blame the problems on others, or become defiant and try to play mind games with you. The employee may also voice his or her own complaints.

Evaluate the employee's position. Even a negative person can have a legitimate complaint. Evaluate not only the employee's response to your remarks but whether the employee has legitimate concerns you need to consider. If the complaint is the basis of the person's negative attitude/behavior, resolving it should result in a more positive situation. Often, however, the complaint is either a smoke screen for the employee's behavior or resulted from the person's own negativity.

Focus on a behavior you want changed, not an attitude. Accept the reality that you may not be able to remake the person into an ideal employee, even if you

are a great manager. However, you can specify an action or goal for the employee and then follow through on the employee's progress. Once you see improvement, focus on another area. Always, of course, acknowledge the employee's efforts.

Ask a peer to speak with the employee. This can get touchy if all of the employee's peers are thoroughly disgusted with the person. Find one or more persons you feel can speak fairly and tactfully with the employee to explain that other employees do not sympathize with his or her negative cause. The goal is to help the person see that a better attitude would benefit everyone.

Consider assigning work that will somewhat isolate the person from other employees and limit contact. Many work situations require cooperation and teamwork that make an isolation technique unworkable, but it may be feasible in some cases. You may even encounter an employee who prefers the isolation and is less negative when working alone. Unfortunately, negative employees often seek out fellow workers--either to complain about the job/boss/life in general, or to accuse other employees as the source of their unhappiness.

Set a limit and stick with it. Managers in a wide variety of businesses have adopted the "three strikes and you're out" rule. Make the employee aware of the limits, tell them when they "strike" and remind them when they have only one "strike" left.

Third, terminate the employee. If the negative employee ignores your warnings and refuses to cooperate, it is time (probably past time) to terminate. Once you decide this is the proper course, take action. Otherwise, you risk a loss of respect and confidence in you as a manager by all employees.

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