

Managing a 'Nervous Nellie'

Trying to encourage your staff to do their best gets harder if one of them is always expecting the worst. You know the type: They see every new idea as a potential disaster and every unexpected twist as a harbinger of doom.

“Nervous Nellies” can stall productivity by focusing attention on what may go wrong. Any kind of change, even a seemingly harmless scheduling adjustment, instantly poses a threat to these people.

What’s worse, you may have trouble keeping their performance on track if they consider every assignment an invitation to fail. They’re so caught up in predicting worst-case scenarios that they may become immobilized.

When you’re faced with someone who considers Murphy’s Law an understatement, take steps to keep the worker motivated while preserving your own sanity:

Reward solutions, not problems. Nellies probably expect to get attention and even accolades for exposing the flaws in others’ plans. Don’t give them the satisfaction. Make a rule that you won’t listen to problems unless they’re accompanied by workable solutions. When they raise questions about an idea’s potential, direct it right back: “So you think the software won’t support the added bandwidth? How would you correct that problem?”

Limit doomsday talk. Don’t tolerate dire predictions unless they can be supported. Rather than ignoring negative comments, confront Nellies directly: “You seem to think the proposed project won’t achieve our goals. Can you explain why?” Demand specific answers, not vague worries.

Set short-term objectives to produce fast results. It’s easy to foresee failure when a project won’t be completed for months or years. Put Nellies to the test by focusing your team’s sights on more timely objectives. Measure results in weekly or even daily segments so they can count their successes quickly and discount unfounded forecasts.

Make attitude a performance measure. Hold Nellies accountable for their impact on morale and set appropriate standards for all your staff. Examples: Gauge to what extent employees encourage their teammates to excel or if they respond to change in a positive manner. While it may be difficult to tie Nellies’ negativity directly to financial or productivity measures, you can establish clear, objective standards for interpersonal behavior.