

How to discipline an employee for a negative attitude

Managers tend not to think twice about taking disciplinary action for things such as absenteeism, tardiness, dress code violations, or poor performance. Leaders may hesitate, though, to do something about employees who display a negative attitude. They wonder if it is legitimate to punish workers for gossiping, whining, persistent pessimism, or other forms of a poor attitude.

Metrics are part of the concern. It is easy to see that Susan is late because the clock reads 15 minutes past her start time when she arrives. Andrea deserves a write-up because she wore flip-flops to the office again after conversations about their inappropriateness. Defining what constitutes a negative attitude proves more difficult.

The temptation exists to shrug off negativity as a personality flaw not worth trying to correct. But employers cannot afford to discount the harmful impact of an employee with a bad attitude. Such negativity carriers inflict what is known as emotional contagion. People around them “catch” their bad mood. If left unchecked, the work environment can turn toxic in a heartbeat. All staff members become at risk for reduced motivation, lower productivity, turnover, and downright foul moods. And if clients and customers pick up on negativity, your company’s reputation suffers.

Generally, managers can discipline for attitude problems in much the same way as any other type of unacceptable behavior. A few adjustments, however, can increase effectiveness. These tweaks may even keep a negative attitude from ever developing.

Know your company’s policies

Small businesses and large ones alike benefit from an established disciplinary policy. These guidelines make it easier for managers to decide what to do. Policies offer consistency. When followed, they help ensure fair treatment and aid in avoiding legal issues. Handling things “by the book” keeps the punishment fitting the offense for everyone. Dismissed employees have a harder time claiming discrimination.

Workers need awareness of company policies, too. The employee handbook should clearly state that a negative attitude harms the work environment, and the company will not tolerate unprofessional or rude behavior. Let everyone know an improper attitude is punishable. Using the employee handbook as a common point of reference, managers can cite the specific rule broken and what follows in terms of consequences. Human resources should provide the employee handbook during onboarding and obtain an employee signature confirming they understand its contents.

Managers also should know when an employee’s behavior needs the immediate attention of an HR professional. A negative attitude toward co-workers or customers because of race, religion, age, sexual orientation, gender, or another protected group spells potential legal trouble. And any negative comments that threaten anyone require quick action.

Grasp the situation

Saying someone has a “bad attitude” is rather vague. Thus, it pays to examine the specific behaviors that generate this label for the team member in question.

Document specific examples. Write down the date and factual observations. Without judgment, what exactly did the person say or do?

Perhaps the worker has several instances of protesting that something “isn’t his job” and refuses to help out. If he composes snarky or insubordinate emails, keep copies. If you receive complaints about the person from others, write down their grievances.

Accumulating proof of unacceptable behavior provides something concrete moving forward. It also reduces the likelihood of the offender thinking you are too picky or simply out to get him.

Hold a discussion

Many companies follow some type of progressive discipline policy. This notification structure provides various levels of warnings that increase in severity if the employee does not change his ways. A common first step is a verbal warning, and this exchange is particularly important when disciplining for a negative attitude.

Sometimes, a worker with a bad attitude does not know a problem exists. She may not realize the extent of her poor behavior or the effect it has on the work environment. A solid performer may believe getting tasks done is the only true measure of an employee and not give a thought to attitude.

In private, discuss the documented incidents and their impact on your company’s morale, operation, and bottom line. Firmly request what you want changed — no more hostile comments at staff meetings, a willingness to pitch in where most needed, interacting more pleasantly with customers, etc. Set a future date on which to meet again to evaluate improvement.

During the conversation, managers may attempt to get to the root causes of the employee’s bad attitude. Perhaps the worker is negative because he lacks job satisfaction. Offering opportunities to learn new tasks might generate greater employee engagement. Or, perhaps the team member genuinely has too much on her plate. Easing some of the burden could result in a more positive attitude.

Take further action if necessary

When verbal warnings fail, a manager may need to create a write-up or letter of reprimand. Putting things in writing often gets people to take the comments more seriously. The action also typically brings human resources into the mix and documents company actions. This paper trail is vital should the employee later claim unlawful termination.

While written warnings tend to give off a formal, disciplinary vibe, they also can serve as inspiration for changing bad behavior. Let the receiver know how important his attitude and energy are to the team. Provide clear steps on change and how much you hope he will take the initiative to eliminate unacceptable attitudes and behavior.

Unfortunately, sometimes written warnings still do not solve the attitude problem. Leaders have no choice but to issue stated disciplinary consequences, perhaps a demotion, suspension, or mandatory sensitivity training. After exhausting other progressive disciplinary measures, termination may end up being the only way to solve the problem once and for all.

Nip negative attitudes

Managers do not relish disciplining for a negative attitude. Finding ways to keep such moods out of the workplace is in everyone's best interest.

The following strategies can help:

Take action

Leaders who tolerate a bad attitude send the message that they aren't all that concerned about it. Similarly, if offenders see little chance of being punished, they have little motivation to change. Speak up and follow disciplinary policy to squash the negativity of a harmful individual and to let the staff know you mean business.

Watch your reward equation

Attention is a powerful reward. Listening too long to complainers or displaying interest in what gossips say encourages them to keep up their negative behavior. After all, it is yielding what they want — your notice.

Stop complaining

Leaders are role models whose behavior must set an example. Chiming in on office gripe sessions promotes their validity and frequency. Exercise discretion, and encourage productive discussions rather than laundry lists of complaints.

Provide feedback outlets

Employees want to have a voice. Give them appropriate chances to air concerns. Encourage workers to drop by for a one-to-one discussion. Pick up the phone to chat with remote workers. Regularly survey employees. Install a comment box. Knowing they will be heard through these channels may keep them from airing grievances elsewhere.

Manage change more effectively

Anything that disturbs the status quo causes reactions. Limit negativity by planning ahead. Look at the change from other people's points of view in order to address possible concerns. Aim for calm, clear communication — it will go over much better than "dropping a bomb."

Enlist everyone's help

Notice negativity permeating the staff? Call on everyone to improve the atmosphere. Examine the current state of the work environment and brainstorm on how to make it better. Work together on specific action steps for becoming the kind of team you all aspire to be.