

How to counsel employees with attitude problems

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With some employees, the problem isn't a matter of ability, it's a matter of attitude. This can manifest itself in everything from [quiet disobedience to outright insubordination](#).

How should you respond to bad attitudes at work?

Rather than becoming entangled in a debate about the employee's dysfunctional attitude, address the situation strictly as a behavioral problem. That way, it's not only easier to resolve, but also a better way to make a case for dismissal.

First things first: document employee's bad behavior

Your first step is to document the behavior. Write down specific verbal and physical behaviors and actions that concern you, hurt team morale, damage productivity or reflect badly on the organization. Don't forget to record nonverbal behaviors, such as rolling eyes, clenching fists and staring into space.

Narrow the issue to the precise problem. Identify exactly what type of behavior the attitude has caused. This list may help:

- Carelessness
- Complaining
- Disruptive or explosive conduct
- Inattention to work
- Insensitivity to others
- Insubordination
- Laziness
- Negative/cynical posture
- Surly/inconsiderate/rude talk
- Excessive socializing

Record the frequency of such misconduct, plus how it affects work flow and colleagues' performance. List good business reasons why the behavior must end.

Meeting with the employee

When you sit down with employees to discuss attitude problems, try to determine whether they have

a reason for their behavior. Is it a grudge against you or against the company in general? If you can't get to the root of the problem, don't think you can't resolve it.

Describe the behaviors you won't tolerate, and tell the employee firmly that those behaviors must stop. Too often, managers fail in their counseling efforts because they skip this (sometimes uncomfortable) step. Also, make sure the employee understands why the behavior must end. Explain how it's causing a problem.

Also, follow up with a description of the preferred behavior, such as cooperation, helpfulness and courteousness. Don't feel bad about being direct. Every manager has the right to demand that employees behave in a courteous and cooperative manner.

Finally, give the employee the opportunity to speak. The person may be unaware of what he or she is doing or not realize how it impedes other people's work. It may also turn out that the attitude problem is a symptom of a more serious problem that needs referral to the employee assistance program.

Coach the employee towards a better attitude

Some negative employees constantly complain, criticize, judge, and never seem to be happy. Their behavior is not directly harmful to anyone, but their bad mood is generally demoralizing. Disciplining those employees is not the answer, though, because their behavior doesn't really break any workplace rules.

For example, an employee whose negativity manifests in [undermining her supervisor](#) and refusing work orders is deserving of discipline for insubordination. However, an employee whose negativity shows in his habitual whining about work, yet he still listens to his supervisor and completes work assignments, is not insubordinate.

Those employees need to motivate themselves to change their attitude. They don't have to make a complete turnaround and become positive. The idea is to not be negative. But they might not know how. That's where you can help. It's good for the morale of the department and company to have a heart-to-heart talk with those employees.

Get employees to evaluate their way of thinking

Their normal behavior is to automatically complain, criticize, and make judgments. Let them continue that behavior on one condition — they conduct a self-audit before saying anything. They should ask themselves:

- Did anyone ask what I thought about the situation or person?
- Am I helping the company by complaining/criticizing/judging?
- Does the complaint/criticism/judgment help my department, co-workers, or manager?
- Will the complaining/criticizing/judging help the person I'm speaking to?
- Will the complaint/criticism/judgment help the person it is about?

If they find that their complaints, criticism, and judgment serve no purpose to anyone, even themselves, then that's exactly where they should keep all of that — to themselves. Explain to the employees that it's okay to not agree with a project deadline, managerial move, co-worker's

personality, etc., but complaining, criticizing, or judging won't change anything.

Give employees advice on how to change their tendency to complain, criticize, and judge

If they can't do any of that unless it helps someone, then what can they do? They can't keep their feelings pent up, either, because that will lead to a host of other problems, such as stress and high blood pressure.

To change their negative feelings and attitude toward others, they need to change or distance themselves from the information or people contributing to their negativity.

Information may influence employees to be negative, so they need to change their daily intake of information or balance it with an equal amount of positive information and activities.

Example: An employee reads the newspaper in the morning and gets a daily dose of bad news about the war in Iraq. It's easy to tell him to stop reading the paper, but that might be part of a morning routine and a hard habit to break. So he should counter that intake of negative information with a positive activity, such as sitting down for breakfast with his children before they go off to school or going out for a quick jog to boost his energy.

Rather than, or in addition to, information, a person might be contributing to employees' negativity. That person could be anyone from an unfriendly coffee shop clerk to a temperamental co-worker. They should limit their interaction with that person or avoid them all together, if possible.

Teach employees to focus on the "bright side," rather than what's wrong with a person or situation

Right now, it's easy for them to focus on the negative, so focusing on the positive will be tough in the beginning. But with practice and over time, they will naturally see the bright side.

Give the employees examples to highlight how you want them to cast complaints in a more positive light. Take these sample phrases:

Complaint: "I hate waking up early in the morning to come to work."

The bright side: "At least you're physically able to get out bed and you have a job to go to."

Complaint: "I can't stand getting stuck in traffic every morning."

The bright side: "You have your own car to drive and are in control of your commute, unlike those who have to take public transportation."

Complaint: "My supervisor always holds meetings at 4:30 on Wednesdays, when we're supposed to leave at 5."

The bright side: "Would you rather she schedule the meeting at the same time on Friday?"

Keeping your cool: 5 tips for dealing with attitudes at work

The last thing you want to do is let negative attitudes impact how you respond or work. Especially if

you are in a supervisory role. Remember these tips next time you're caught up in someone's negativity or bad attitude.

1. Put problem people in perspective. Don't take their antics personally.
2. Go somewhere to cool off. You can't concentrate on constructive, creative alternatives while you're clinging to anger.
3. Learn to respond as well as listen. Be assertive. Don't expect an employee to read your mind. Let him or her know when you're annoyed, upset or disappointed.
4. Be straightforward. The more you remain matter-of-fact, the less you encourage an employee to play games.
5. Be gracious. Someone's rudeness doesn't give you the right to respond in kind.

Last, but not least: be prepared to fail

Some people with attitude problems can't be saved, no matter how much counseling you provide.