



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H036D9
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
OCTOBER 03, 2016

ARTICLE **CONFLICT**

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by Amy Gallo

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OCTOBER 03, 2016 UPDATED OCTOBER 03, 2016



There's that one person on your team — the bad apple who has nothing positive to say, riles up other team members, and makes work life miserable. If you can't fire him, how do you respond to his behavior? What feedback do you give? How do you mitigate the damage he inflicts?

What the Experts Say

There's a difference between a difficult employee and a toxic one, says Dylan Minor, an assistant professor at the Kellogg School of Management who studies this topic. "I call them toxic because not only do they cause harm but they also spread their behavior to others," she explains. "There's a pattern of de-energizing, frustrating or putting down teammates," adds Christine Porath, an

associate professor at Georgetown and the author of *Mastering Civility: A Manifesto for the Workplace*. “It’s not just that Joe is rude. The whole team suffers because of it.” Of course, your first step as a manager should be to avoid [hiring toxic people in the first place](#), but once they’re on your team, it can be hard to get rid of them. “Oftentimes the behavior doesn’t run against anything legal so you can’t fire them if others in the organization don’t agree that a line has been crossed,” Porath explains. Here’s what to do instead.

Dig deeper

The first step is to take a closer look at the behavior and what’s causing it. Is the person unhappy in the job? Struggling in their personal life? Frustrated with coworkers? “You might meet with them and ask how they’re doing — at work, at home, and with their career development,” suggests Porath. If you find there’s a reason for why they’re acting the way they are, offer to help. “A manager can use this information to coach the person, or suggest resources to help address the root of the problem.” For example, adds Minor, if the person is going through a divorce or [struggling with a mental health issue](#), you could offer “counseling resources or time off that could potentially alleviate” the underlying issue.

Give them direct feedback

In many cases, toxic people are oblivious to the effect they have on others. “Most of the time people don’t realize that they’re as destructive as they are,” Porath says. “They’re too focused on their own behaviors and needs to be aware of the broader impact.” That’s why it’s crucial to give direct and honest feedback — so they understand the problem and have an opportunity to change. The [standard feedback rules apply](#): Objectively explain the behavior and its effects, using specific, concrete examples. “It’s not helpful to say, ‘You’re annoying us all,’” Porath explains. “You have to ground it in the work.” Also discuss what kind of behavior you’d like to see instead and develop an improvement plan with the employee. “What do you expect them to change? Strive for clearly defined, measurable goals,” Porath says. “You’re giving them the chance to have a more positive impact on people.”

Explain the consequences

If the carrot doesn’t work, you can also try the stick. “We all tend to respond more strongly to potential losses than we do to potential gains, so it’s important to show offenders what they stand to lose if they don’t improve,” says Porath. If the person is hesitant to reform, figure out what they care most about — the privilege of working from home, their bonus—and put that at stake. For most people, the possibility of missing out on a promised promotion or suffering other consequences “tied to the pocketbook” will be a strong motivation to behave in a more civil way.

Accept that some people won’t change

Of course, you should always hope that the person can change but not everyone will respond to the tactics listed above. Minor is currently researching toxic doctors and says that early results indicate that some are either unable or unwilling to change. Porath’s research on incivility has meanwhile [found that “4% of people](#) engage in this kind of behavior just because it’s fun and they believe they

can get away with it.” In those extreme cases, you should recognize that you won’t be able to fix the problem and begin to explore more serious responses.

Document everything

If you conclude that you really need to fire the person, you must first document their offenses and any response you’ve offered so far. “You want to establish a pattern of behavior, the steps you took to address it, the information, warnings or resources provided to the employee, and the failure of the employee to change,” Porath says. Include “supporting material” too: formal complaints, relevant information from performance evaluations, such as 360-degree or peer reviews. The idea, says Minor, is to protect yourself and the company and to show your employee exactly why they are being let go.

Separate the toxic person from other team members

Even if you can’t get rid of a bad apple, you can isolate it from the rest of the bushel so the rot doesn’t spread. Minor’s research shows that people close to a toxic employee are more likely to become toxic themselves, but the good news is that the risk also subsides quickly,” he says. As soon as you put some physical distance between the offender and the rest of the team – for example, by rearranging desks, reassigning projects, scheduling fewer all-hands meetings, or encouraging more work-from-home days – you’ll see the situation start to improve. Porath calls this “immunizing” the others. “You’re trying to protect people like you would with a disease,” she says. “You will hopefully decrease the number of run-ins and the cognitive loss.” But make sure to do this with discretion. Let employees come to you with their complaints about the toxic colleague and use “one-on-one conversations” to coach them on how they might minimize their interactions.”

Don’t get distracted

Managing a toxic person can eat up your time, energy, and productivity. But “don’t spend so much on one individual that your other priorities fall by the wayside,” says Porath. To counteract the negativity and make sure [you’re still thriving](#), “surround yourself with supportive, positive people” and “look for meaning and purpose in your work,” she says. Also focus on basic self-care. “If someone is draining you, build yourself up by exercising, eating right, sleeping, and taking breaks, both short-term ones and vacations,” she says. “Being healthy and proactive is the one thing we know that buffers people from the effects of toxic behavior.”

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Talk to the person to try to understand what’s causing the behavior.
- Give concrete, specific feedback and offer the opportunity to change.
- Look for ways to minimize interactions between the toxic employee and the rest of your team.

Don’t:

- Bring the situation up with your other team members. Allow them to mention it first and then provide suggestions.
- Try to fire the person unless you've documented the behavior, its impact, and your response.
- Get so wrapped up in handling the issue that you ignore more important work and responsibilities.

Case Study #1: Give direct feedback and support the rest of the team

Christina Del Villar, the director of marketing at the e-commerce operations software firm Webgility, managed a small team at a start-up earlier in her career. One employee, Sharon (not her real name), a senior marketing manager, was making the rest of the group miserable.

“She was an alcoholic, abused drugs, and had a medical condition,” Christina recalls, Her work was “full of mistakes,” her work ethic was poor — “she was often out of the office, at least one day a week, if not more” — and she frequently took credit for others’ efforts.

Christina made sure to document the behavior but says she couldn’t fire Sharon because the woman “had threatened to sue for a variety of reasons, including her medical condition” should she be let go. Instead, she worked to prevent “the negativity from seeping into everything” by routinely giving Sharon feedback and direction. “Sometimes people don’t realize the impact they’re having so I like to have a blunt conversation with them about their behavior, what they can do to change it, and how they can work better with the team.” Her approach was “delicate” because, with Sharon “you never really knew who you were going to get on any given day.” But she learned to read her employee’s “state of mind” and “pick days where she would be more accepting of this kind of conversation.”

Christina also supported the rest of the team. “Sometimes it was as easy as saying they were doing a great job or thanking them for stepping up to “fill the void” left by Sharon, she explains. She also encouraged them to focus on themselves and their work, “not on what someone else was or was not be doing.” When they complained about Sharon, she offered advice “while still respecting everyone’s privacy and staying within the law.”

While Christina’s efforts reduced the negative impact Sharon was having, the problem was ultimately solved by circumstance. When their business was acquired by a larger company, Sharon moved to a different department.

Case Study #2: Help him rebuild his reputation

Daniel Hanson (not his real name) once managed an IT team at a large multinational that suffered every time it had to interact with Bob (also not his real name), a senior internal consultant. “He had a habit of talking down to people and being dismissive and was blissfully unaware that his behaviors irritated people,” Daniel recalls.

With a little probing, Daniel discovered some of the reasons for Bob’s negativity. “His personal life was a mess between bad relationships and estranged children. Plus he’d realized that he had reached

a certain age and hadn't achieved the professional satisfaction that he wanted and he thought he deserved.”

Still, Daniel made clear to Bob that his behavior needed to change. He recommended a counselor provided by the company and offered up his own time and advice in weekly meetings. “I told him this was his last chance and that the next step was a formal performance management plan and almost inevitably exit from the business,” he says.

Although many managers “hated Bob with a passion,” Daniel encouraged them to stop talking about him behind his back, “to see that he was trying to change and to include him in more senior projects under close observation.” He spoke to people individually and “pointed out that his contribution on numerous projects had been immense.”

“Gradually, as Bob’s behavior changed, their attitudes toward him changed as well,” Daniel says. He’s proud that, when Bob did eventually transfer to another team, it was because he’d wanted to go, not because he’d been forced out.

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review and the author of the [HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict at Work](#). She [writes and speaks](#) about workplace dynamics. Follow her on Twitter at [@amyegallo](#).
