

Project Pointers

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Most of us have an academic calendar in the back of our minds, even if formal education is far in the past. Autumn marks the beginning of many activities and changes. So, it seems appropriate to make the transition to an electronic newsletter in September. I've received so many requests for an electronic version of past newsletters that I slowly got the message. I hope you will find this version to be more useful. As always, I appreciate feedback on format and content.

Working with Difficult People

The summer issue of Project Pointers introduced the challenging topic of working with difficult people. Again, difficult people are those who impede action; they stand between our goals and our ability to move forward with our project steps. To avoid overload, we will concentrate on seven labels: Bully, Whiner, Sniper, Disengaged, Know It All, Placator and Overly Sensitive. The next two newsletters will offer tips for coping with them.

The Bully

Scenario: Jane has lunch every day at noon. Sarah asks Jane if she can change her lunchtime for the week so Sarah can finish an important project. Jane's face turns crimson and she yells, "No one is going to die if you don't finish this project. Ask Len to change his lunchtime. You're always trying to get in good with the Executive Director."

Sound familiar? The bully is a steamroller who intimidates and leaves

others walking on eggshells. A bully may shake her fists, slam doors and send nasty emails with no signs of remorse. They are disruptive, disrespectful and self absorbed. Taken to an extreme, their behavior can lead to violence.

When responding to a bully, choose your battles and don't get drawn into each episode of disruptive behavior. Ask yourself if taking one small step will help instead of taking on the whole set of behaviors. Focus on finding a solution and do not feel you must explain why you are making a change. With bullies, it helps to offer more than one remedy. Saying, "You decide, either is ok" allows the person to feel some sense of control. Stand your ground, focus on the bottom line and give them an out. Finally, hard as it may be . . . let them have the last word.

If the bully's behavior moves along the continuum from being annoying to being verbally abuse or potentially physically abusive, notify a supervisor immediately and consider seeking legal advice. Begin to keep a written record of the bully's behavior, saving emails and notes. If possible, confront the bully in a group and let others talk about how the difficult behaviors are making everyone uncomfortable. There is both power and safety in numbers in such cases. Of course, if tension continues, a formal disciplinary action may be required.

The Whiner

Scenario: For the past two weeks, John has complained about the office coffee. He leaves the employee lounge with a cup, grumbling all the way, then stands over Carrie's desk and says, "This stuff isn't fit for human consumption." Three weeks later, Carrie tells John there is new, good coffee. Then he says, "Coffee isn't good for us anyway. We should have green tea."

While this example may seem trivial compared to client needs, it probably is common. The whiner grumps and groans about everything but usually has no suggestions. Remember that whiners are not doers--whining is fun for them! The glass is always half empty--and likely to drain out in ten seconds. This negative tone breeds pessimism in staff and wastes productivity. Whiners also have an insatiable need to get things right. When perfection is not achieved, they take it out on everyone else.

When dealing with a whiner, make it clear you are not going to fuel

his or her bad habits. Listen carefully to their areas of concern (which may indeed be overly dramatic) and seek the true content issues that are important. Then you can direct the efforts to a solution. Model the opposite behavior when talking with them and try saying as little as possible. Don't even respond! You can then introduce an alternate discussion topic. Or, you may just agree with the person and move on.

If the whiner is complaining because something is not right and they do not know how to fix it, immediately move them into problem solving mode. Step by step, ask them to work with you to answer the who, what, where, why and how questions. Another tactic is to use directed questions. Make it the whiner's responsibility to resolve concerns. For example, if he complains about office chairs, try to ask, "What do you suggest?" or "How can you gather information to improve this?" Finally, set time limits with a whiner ("I have a meeting in five minutes.") and ask them to put their concerns in writing. If you are trying to protect the staff from a whiner, putting them in a work group with strong people may put a lid on their difficult habits.

The Sniper

Scenario: Your colleague was a candidate for the promotion that you received. He "forgets" to tell you about an important committee meeting. When the meeting starts, he explains with sarcasm and rolling eyes that you were too busy to come.

We all know these manipulative sneaks. Instead of acting like the bully, the sniper maneuvers you and others when he is frustrated by a situation. He takes potshots and undercuts your authority through sarcasm, rude comments and exaggerated body language. He may use the silent treatment, glare, walk out when someone is speaking or ignore phone calls. Snipers are tricky because most have acted this way since grade school and they do not like to take no for an answer. As a result, people in the office avoid them and assume there is an ulterior motive.

First, do not deny what is happening. Your intuition is correct and the sniping is real. The best defense against a sniper is to expose them publicly. Say no early. If you say no, she is likely to be verbally aggressive on the spot and be observed by others. Then, try to detach. Accept that this person is a sniper, acknowledge that she is competitive and has a hidden agenda. Also begin to document what

you can and find ways to uncover any covert communication.

It's tempting to anticipate what a sniper may say. But try to take time to listen in case she does have a legitimate concern. Then when you know you are right, stand firm. Reframing your thoughts and asking clarifying questions may help—just make sure those questions cannot be answered with one word. If these tactics do not work, repeat yourself and do not offer an alternative. For example, "I need your report by noon" may have to be stated four times, but do not tell the sniper that mid afternoon is just as good.

If they ask to discuss something again, you can invite a third party to join you. This could be your boss or someone from HR. The sniper wants an appreciative audience and prefers one-on-one conversations; she does not want to be observed by anyone else.

The Disengaged

Scenario: A case manager who supervises several social workers mostly works in her office with the door closed. She does not walk through the department, rarely asks about cases, does not provide training or professional development opportunities, does not join social outings and makes no attempt to get to know the people she supervises. She puts in the minimal amount of time required in the office.

Silence is not golden if it's coming from disengagement. This is a particularly difficult group of people. They may not reveal their true motives and you end up guessing about them most of the time. You also have to work harder to gain the feedback you need because they tend to miss out on both formal and informal communication chains. A missing link slows the information flow, as they often do not speak up. Simply, the disengaged chill group cohesiveness.

A disengaged person fears criticism, so does nothing. You have to build rapport and gain their trust. Try to align your tone to theirs, speak more softly and mimic their nonverbal behavior. Set a good example of open communication and consider offering a communications workshop for the staff. Also remember that most disengaged people like to process and may require more time for responding.

Keep your office door open so they are more comfortable approaching you. Maintain physical proximity and ask questions that

cannot be answered simply; draw them out with open-ended questions and be sure and give them credit for their ideas. Finally, avoid comments about their disengagement and try to wait out the silence.

The next issue of Project Pointers will focus on the Know It All, Placator and Overly Sensitive. In the meantime, do not hesitate to give me a call if you would like to discuss any specific workplace issues or learn more about my three-hour course, Working With Difficult People.

Enjoy autumn,



Project Management Workshop

**Marta's popular Successful Project Management workshop will be offered on
December 4, 2008 - 9:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
at The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati
3805 Edwards Road, Suite 500
Cincinnati, OH 45209**



Register online at: [Workshop Registration](#)

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