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The Passive–Aggressive Co–Worker

By Susan Dunn

The Passive–Aggressive Co–Worker by Susan Dunn, MA, Emotional Intelligence Coach & Consultant

Is there anything worse? Is there any office without one? I doubt it and I doubt it. So what do you do when you're faced with The Passive–Aggressive Co–Worker?

First of all, understand they're playing mind games with you. If the sign that you're dealing with a paranoid person is that you get paranoid, the sign that you're dealing with a passive–aggressive person is that you get angry. Not a quick, clean, clear anger, as you would with someone who confronted you directly. It's a cloudy sort of emotion that starts slowly. Often, in fact, you'll be curious about the person. Why? Because part of being "passive" is being "hidden," and so your curiosity is peaked, but not for long. Soon you discover how toxic it is to deal with this person.

What sort of jobs do they have? Quite often, frankly, it's a job that's rather low on the totem pole, but one, nevertheless, that has power. Also they are often entrenched, dug in like a tick. They have been there "forever," or may have some special ties to the boss or manager. They have some sort of protected status, or tenure, which allows them to stay where they are when no one likes them or wants to work with them.

If it's any consolation, they generally aren't promoted, being unpromotable, but this only adds to the negativity that feeds their passive–aggression.

An example would be the Supply Clerk in a law firm. They're responsible for "special" supplies - such as when a trial notebook is needed - and are often also in charge of assembling it. This puts them in a very powerful position, as they can stall your work just at the time it's needed most. You can really hit a brick wall if your boss is unaware or unconcerned, or if they're the one who keeps the P–A person on staff.

Trying to ingratiate yourself to the P–A person rarely works. They usually aren't truly friendly people, so they may let you try, but it doesn't lead to real cooperation, nor will it solve your problem.

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HERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU CAN TRY:

1. Start documentation.

Note that you've asked them to do something and then make the paper trail. At least in that way, if the project fails, your supervisor or boss will see where the problem was.

2. Go around them if you possibly can.

Order extra supplies when you don't need them and stockpile them. Write your own memos. Make the phone call yourself. It's just easier in the long run, and will save you a lot of frustration.

3. Confront them with particular behavioral issues.

That is, don't go into personalities, which is tempting in this case, but state what happened and how you felt about it. When they fail to deliver, state this. "I asked you to XXX and you said you would, and then you didn't." Then just let it hang. Sometimes when they've been "uncovered," they'll respond better to you.

4. Go directly to your supervisor and state the problem in behavioral terms.

Deal with facts and give specific examples. Show how the P–A person is hampering your productivity, and ask your supervisor what you should do about it.

5. If you have any leverage over the person, use it.

Document, and deal with hard consequences immediately. The sooner you nip it in the bud, the better. I've seen it work to say, "Some day you're going to need my help on something. I'd suggest you cooperate with me so when you need my help, it will be there."

6. When you must give this person an assignment (but are not their direct supervisor), ask them directly about results. "This must be completed by noon on Thursday. Will you have it ready then?" Wait for a "yes" or a "no."

7. Keep your head clear to circumvent the mind games.

Though they don't intentionally mean to be harmful, they intentionally are doing the behavior they are that's aggravating. I so often hear clients say, after a long lament about the circumstances and how they were "done in," "But they're a good person. I know they didn't mean to do that." Unfortunately, yes they DID "mean to do that." The catch is, they may not be mindful of what they're doing; in fact usually they are not. It's a self–protective mode, where they're focused on themselves.

So direct confrontation doesn't work. They can deny all day long, and will have plenty of excuses.

8. Don't think you can change them.

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If they know they have protection, they have no motivation to change. This is a deeply ingrained personality trait and you aren't going to be the one to change what it took years to develop. That doesn't mean you have to lower your own standards and treat them poorly; it just means you need to conserve your time and energy.

9. Check things out with your co–workers to get consensual validation.

Several heads and perceptions are better than one, especially if you decide to present this to a supervisor in a united front. You may still get the answer that nothing can be done.

10. Get support from your colleagues.

Sometimes you can arrange a way you can work around this person.

11. Counter their negative talk (usually goes along with it), by concrete examples to the contrary, and

limit your exposure to them.

It can be infuriating to work with a passive–aggressive person, so take care of yourself, and protect your emotions and attitude. Limit your contact with the person, and practice methods of self–soothing. Learn to "let go" and do the best you can.

I have heard many people say, "There's nothing worse than an office where you can't stand one person." If this is how you feel, consider transferring or getting another job. Don't become passive–aggressive yourself. Remain assertive. You always have options. Sometimes when enough good people quit, management takes action. The bad news is, you won't be around there when it happens, but the good news is you won't be around there when it happens.

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Why is Bobby Knight Explosive?

By John Boe

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Bobby Knight is presently the head basketball coach at Texas Tech. Prior to being hired by them Bobby Knight spent twenty–nine years coaching basketball at Indiana University. In those twenty–nine years he coached many successful basketball teams and in fact, brought three NCAA basketball championships back to Indiana. He was recognized as a strict disciplinarian and used a "hands on" coaching style. Coach Knight was feared and respected not only by the opposing team, but by his own

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players as well. His winning tradition at Indiana University made him an icon for college basketball. Here is a man who was at the top of his game and appeared to have it all. So what happened? Why did Indiana fire him as their head basketball coach? Essentially Bobby Knight lost his job when he lost his temper. It has been said that people are a lot like steel, once they loose their temper they are rendered useless. Unfortunately when most people think of Bobby Knight, they picture an irate coach throwing a chair across the basketball court dramatically underscoring his disagreement with an official's call. His explosive and volatile temper ultimately caused him to be placed on probation at Indiana University after he chocked one of his players during practice.

Why are some people more aggressive and volatile than others? Twenty–four hundred years ago, Hippocrates, the father of medicine, theorized that we are born into one of four primary temperament styles and that each style has it's own unique physiology, character traits and outlook on life; Choleric (aggressive), Sanguine (emotional), Phlegmatic (passive) and Melancholy (analytical). Of these four styles, the Choleric or Worker style is the most impatient, ill natured and short tempered. The Worker temperament style is the D in the D.I.S.C. profiling system. Bobby Knight has the Worker as his primary temperament style and therefore like most Workers, has a challenge with anger management. This style is often referred to as a "Workaholic or Type A" personality. When they get angry their tendency is to explode like a volcano and then get over it quickly and go about their business as if nothing had happened. Workers are aggressive, no–nonsense people who seek power and control. They are goal–oriented individuals with a practical, bottom line approach to life. The Worker is extroverted by nature. People who have the Worker as their primary temperament style are physically large, powerful people with broad shoulders. Other well–known Workers are; Mike Tyson, John Wayne, Vince Lombardi, George C. Scott, Bea Arthur, Pete Rose, Janet Reno, O.J. Simpson, Joseph Stalin, George S. Patton and Jim Brown.

Bobby Knight developed a winning tradition while at Indiana University by demanding that his players learn how to play under pressure and adversity. Ironically, self–control was the one thing coach Knight was unable to give back to them! Bobby Knight is a good example of a bad example. He reminds us all that the strength of our temperament style taken to the extreme becomes our greatest personal weakness. He has been given a second chance to coach at Texas Tech. Let's hope that he learned his lesson and will control his legendary, explosive temper!

John Boe, based in Monterey, CA, helps companies recruit, train and motivate top–quality people. To view his online Video Demo or to have John Boe speak at your next event, visit www.johnboe.com or

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