

How Bad Employee Behavior Can Corrupt Your Whole Team



Just about everyone can relate to having a bad day at work now and then. But for some employees, negativity, a bad attitude, and unacceptable behavior become a way of life.

And when one of these “bad apples” is left unmanaged, their toxicity can spread to their co-workers—and, over time, spoil the whole bunch.

Difficult employees can have a negative impact on their whole team, create a toxic work environment, and even increase your company’s financial and legal risk exposure.

But by understanding how bad employee behavior begins, how it can spread among team members, and what you can do to manage, rehabilitate, or even remove toxic employees, you can nip negative behavior in the bud and ensure your business is positive, productive, and profitable.

What Causes Bad Employee Behavior?

Before you can address the notion of a “problem employee,” it’s important to realize that someone having a bad day now and then doesn’t qualify.

Instead, this term is best applied to chronically negative employees whose bad attitudes, problematic employee behavior (including, for example, excessive absenteeism or consistent and escalating conflict with co-workers), and poor performance makes them a threat to not just *esprit de corps*, but productivity and profits.

There's no single type of employee who's destined to move from the "good employee" to "bad apple" column. And in general, the average worker doesn't set out with the goal to become a cautionary tale about the dangers of toxic employee performance or even simply being a negative person.

Today's bad apple most likely began as a productive and positive member of their workgroup.

But life, as they say, intrudes, and a number of underlying issues can have a powerful negative impact on employee behavior and attitude, including:

- Stress
- Overworking and/or burnout
- Feeling unappreciated, unheard, or ignored
- Challenges in their health, relationships, or personal life
- Interpersonal conflict with other team members

Whatever the reason(s) for their negative behavior, difficult employees cannot be allowed to proceed unchecked, as there's much more at risk than just their own job performance or future with the company.

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Bad Employee Behavior Can Be Costly—and Contagious

Beyond the notion of negativity as a general morale-crusher, negative employees can hamstring productivity and create problems with other team members, suppliers, and even your customers.

Let's consider some specific examples of how bad behavior can affect problem employees, their coworkers, and your company's bottom line:

- **Productivity and Team Cohesion:** Nobody wants to spend their work hours saddled with Debbie Downer. Teams meant to work together may fragment or develop work-arounds to avoid engaging with these "Negative Nellies," deepening the schism between the negative employee and their coworkers and making it much more difficult for the team or workgroup to achieve its goals effectively.
- **Employee Absenteeism and Turnover:** Another risk that comes with team members actively avoiding difficult employees is good employees changing their schedules, skipping work, or actively looking for new jobs to get out of what seems like an untenable situation. This not only costs you the value generated by their skills and talents, but creates new recruitment expenses as you scramble to replace them.
- **Lingering Resentment:** If team members see bad attitudes and negative behaviors running amok without any correction, they may come to resent management and regard them as inefficient and ineffective. This can quickly lead to a much more serious and widespread outbreak of unacceptable behavior and bad attitudes.
- **Lost Profits:** Missed deadlines, incomplete deliverables, or shoddy service can quickly deep-six relationships with customers. Inefficiencies and delays from interpersonal conflict can cost you more in late payment fees from vendors, wasted materials, and lost focus and productivity.
- **Increased Risk Exposure:** If the negative behavior becomes too severe and other team members come to regard the work environment as toxic, your business may be at risk of costly legal action. The same is true for unhappy customers, who may be insulted by rude or unprofessional behavior or reveal that your "bad apple" is not performing their duties as dictated by the agreement between you and your clients. Either way, proactive risk management will be required to insulate the company from potential threats.

Obviously, these effects and their attendant risks are serious causes for concern. But one of the most serious side effects of a truly negative employee is how *highly contagious* their behavior can be.

A 2018 study by the *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) found that, without

managerial intervention, problematic employee behaviors quickly spread throughout an entire organization.

In fact, HBR's study uncovered a number of unsettling trends, including:

- Financial advisors were 37% more likely to engage in unacceptable behavior if they worked directly with another team member with a history of professional misconduct.
- Misconduct appears to have a social multiplier of approximately .59. In effect, every instance of unacceptable behavior produces, on average, an additional .59 instances. Even one instance is a problem, but when the negativity and bad behavior begins to scale, a business can quickly find itself neck-deep in a morass of negativity, lost value, and unacceptable risk exposure.
- Individuals from the same peer group—particularly those who shared the same ethnicity—were particularly susceptible to this corruption. Financial advisors who worked directly with a coworker who not only had a history of misconduct but shared the advisor's ethnicity were *nearly twice as likely* to engage in misconduct themselves.

To keep unprofessionalism and negativity from infecting their entire organizations, managers and team leaders need to take a proactive and intelligent approach to handling difficult employees.

Best Practices for Managing and Improving Bad Employee Behavior

No two companies will have the exact same approach to managing negative employees or their bad behavior.

Each organization has its own internal standards and expectations, as well as whatever legal and industry requirements are associated with their specific products and services.

That said, just about every business can benefit from following “The Four Ds” when developing and implementing their strategy for managing and minimizing negative attitudes and unacceptable behaviors: Define, Discuss, Document, and Demonstrate.

1. **Define** your company's standards for acceptable behavior and bake it into your official policies. This not only serves to buttress existing legal protections against discrimination and harassment, but also provides a clear explanation of:

- Your company's core values and standards.
- Expectations for how employees will treat other people, including vendors, coworkers, and customers.
- Guidelines for professionalism.
- Resources available for employees who may be struggling to meet behavioral standards due to issues in their personal life, overwork, interpersonal conflict, perceived toxic work environment, etc. Be sure to work closely with your human resources department to establish these resources and ensure every employee feels seen, valued, and understood.
- How behavioral standards are integrated with performance evaluation.
 - The ways in which attitude and professionalism impact the employee's performance review.
 - The connection between behavioral requirements and employee job descriptions (e.g., dependability, collaboration, and open communication are expected of all employees regardless of role).
 - What corrective actions will be used in the event the employee fails to meet these standards (e.g., a performance improvement plan) and how these actions may escalate over time as required, up to and including termination where warranted.

By enshrining these expectations (and their attendant explanations) in your company's official documentation and handbook, you'll give team members a crystal-clear understanding of what's expected, knowledge of how they can get help if they need it, and what they'll need to do to get back on track should they find themselves struggling.

2. **Discuss** performance issues and problematic behaviors directly with difficult employees quickly and professionally. Communicate to them the ways in which their bad attitude and toxic behaviors are disrupting their workgroup's productivity. Review official company policy on professionalism and draw a clear line to underscore how negativity and unprofessionalism is, in effect, failing to perform their assigned duties.

Take care to coordinate with human resources to treat each case on its own merits.

Be ready to explore what factors are causing the negative behaviors and attitudes, and what resources you can offer to help them overcome their challenges and put this kind of behavior to an end.

Remember, too, to follow procedures, be consistent and communicative, and focus on solving the problem and helping the employee, rather than simply punishing them for failing to comply with company protocol and standards.

3. **Document** all interactions to provide both complete and clear information and ensure you have adequate documentation for legal reasons. Take a professional and unbiased approach to documentation; make sure it is accurate and specific and contains complete information about any incidents that may occur.

These entries can be used to show improvement (or lack thereof) over time, making it much easier to provide your team members with the help they need—or determine when it's time to escalate.

4. **Demonstrate** a good example by following protocols and policies in your own behavior. This will help encourage cohesion and camaraderie, and reassure your team members that no one is above the policies set for professionalism and performance.

Don't Let Negative Behavior Ruin the Potential of Good Employees

Life doesn't stop at the office door, and everyone has personal and professional challenges that can lead to stress, frustration, and negativity.

But by working closely with human resources to establish, communicate, and enforce expectations for employees' behavior, you can help create a work environment where people know their roles, strive for cohesion rather than negativity, and can get the help they need to support your business' goals for profitability and positivity.

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