

CHAPTER

Let's Talk: Specific Counseling Sessions

THROUGHOUT YOUR CAREER, you will encounter numerous situations involving problem employees and employees with problems. Managers tell me that they don't have a problem holding a counseling session, but they do have difficulty coming up with a realistic action plan—particularly for troubled employees. Consequently, we'll offer here some specific action plans to help you as well.

Counseling Peers on a Cross-Functional Team

Just as most management books provide a simplistic picture of employee counseling, books on team management talk in general terms about team counseling. The truth is, without positional power over your colleagues, counseling team members about their behavior is tantamount to your saying to the colleague, "I'm right and you're wrong."

So, when counseling peers, you need to make a point of not sounding self-righteous. This would only alienate them when what you want to do is to get their cooperation, their appreciation of the consequences to the team's mission of their continued misbehavior, and their agreement to an action plan that will change the situation. If they accept your assessment of their behavior and readily agree to your recommendation, you're home free. You've done your counseling job. But it isn't always as easy as that. Not all your team members will be team players, willing to cooperate and accept and act on the feedback from someone who is *just* a peer. As an example, let's look at how one team member's lack of

punctuality affected the rest of the team, and how a manager handled the situation. When Jekyll Apparel formed a new product team, Jill, its leader, worked with the group to set operating ground rules, including the need for members to be punctual for the start of each meeting. Still, Ted never seemed to be able to get to sessions on time.

Jill didn't let that cause her to delay the start of the meetings, which began on schedule. She knew how busy Ted was, so she never said anything, even though his late arrivals—usually fifteen to twenty minutes after the scheduled meeting started—tended to disrupt the group's discussion. Ted was responsible for developing the numbers for any business plans the group submitted, and he usually came loaded down with paperwork. While he got seated, and arranged his documentation on the table or on a nearby chair, discussion seemed to stall.

Was Jill right not to talk to Ted about his chronic lateness and its effect on the team? If the problem had been short-lived, maybe. But after a month, by which time Ted's workload had lessened, he continued to arrive at meetings late. On one or two occasions, he also came empty-handed, his assignments unfinished. Jill saw also that Ted's indifference to being punctual, along with his laxity about his team assignments, was infecting other members of the team. Betty, Ken, and Marian, three other group members, also began to arrive late.

Jill was upset but not as much as members of the group who continued to take the operating guidelines seriously. Jill had seen some factiousness between the tardy and prompt members, but she had assumed it had to do with the proposals on the table; it had never occurred to her, until Franny spoke up, that those who had made a point of arriving on time were furious with the late arrivals, and that it was being reflected in the group's discussions.

"Do you know, Jill," Franny said, "over the last two months I figure I have spent about seven hours or a day's worth of my time waiting for Ted and his cohorts to arrive for these meetings? Why can't we just start without them?"

"Ted is bringing some key data today," Jill replied. "We need it to move beyond our earlier discussion of new overseas markets."

"You're assuming that he has done the work," Zoë said. Beside her, Julio nodded his head. Julio then rose. "I'll be in my office, Jill. I have some correspondence to get to. Let me know when you want to get down to work."

Jill realized that she had a serious problem on her hands as Zoë and Bill followed Julio out of the room. When Ted, Betty, Ken, and Marian

arrived, they were surprised to find only Jill present. She called Julio, Zoë, and Franny into the room and the group got down to work. Fortunately, for Jill—and for Ted's reputation among his peers—he had completed his expected number crunching. But that didn't let him off the hook, in Jill's opinion. Nor were Betty, Ken, and Marian innocent bystanders because they had begun to emulate Ted's behavior.

Confronting the Culprits

Before the next meeting, Jill met with each of the late arrivers. As you can imagine, Betty, Ken, and Marian all used Jill's failure to do anything about Ted's chronic tardiness and undone assignments to excuse their own behavior.

"You're right, I should have talked to Ted about coming late to meetings," Jill admitted to Marian when she went to see her colleague. "But that isn't justification for your pattern of lateness over the last few meetings. You also promised to have demographics for the team for both the London and Southampton markets. You're late with the information."

"Ted has been late, too, in the past, and you haven't said anything about it," Marian said in defense.

"Yes, I know. But we're talking about your commitment to the team, not Ted's," Jill continued.

"I . . ." Marian stammered.

"I know how busy you are," Jill said. "But the team needs your knowledge and support." Jill knew how important it was for Marian to be respected by her peers and it became her ace. Pulling it out, she said, "Your fellow team members will admire your contribution to the effort."

Marian started to defend her past behavior once again, then abruptly stopped. "Maybe you're right," she conceded. "I have been too cavalier about my participation in the new products group. I will be on time in the future. And, Jill," she added, "I'll have those demographics for you by tomorrow. We can distribute them ahead of the meeting, so everyone will have a chance to study them before the session."

"Great," said Jill. Jill also spoke to Ken and Betty. In Jill's discussion with Ken, she used the importance of the team's mission to his product line to get his agreement to change his behavior. Peer pressure worked with Betty, who was reminded of how angry she had been with a colleague who had never arrived on time in another team situation. "I can imagine how others on the team must have felt about my actions," she

told Jill. “I’ve got a new computer program and I can use it to program my computer to buzz me when I’m due at a meeting. I’ll be there next week on time,” she promised. “Now for Ted,” Jill began. She found him in his office working on his computer, and came right to the point.

Jill: Ted, I’m concerned about whether you have sufficient time to continue on the new product team.

Ted: Why do you say that?

Jill: You’ve missed several assignment dates and been late for almost every meeting.

Ted: Hey, what are you doing? Keeping records? Who do you think you are, anyway? My boss?

Jill: Not at all. But when you joined the team, you agreed to the ground rules that we all wrote. When you are continually late and don’t complete team assignments on time, you’re not meeting the commitment you made to the group when you helped us set those ground rules.

Ted: Others have been late.

Jill: Yes, I’m afraid that’s because no one said anything; they thought it was acceptable. It isn’t. We all agreed we would make an effort to be on time, be prepared, and attend all the meetings. As team leader, I should have said something to you. But I knew you were so busy with other tasks at the start of the project that I turned a blind eye to what was occurring. Now I have to ask you: Can you make our meetings on time? Otherwise, I will have to look for someone else to do your job. I don’t want to do that if I don’t have to—you’re too valuable to the team effort—but I will have to find a replacement if you can’t carry out your responsibilities to the group.

Ted stared at Jill for a moment. The two had been at loggerheads during several sessions of the team, but he had to admit that punctuality had been among the ground rules. He doubted that Jill would replace him on the team, but he didn’t want to risk losing his presence in this high-visibility group. “All right,” he said. “It’ll actually help me to better prepare for the meetings. I can review my handouts in the meeting room just before the session starts to be better prepared to explain the assumptions on which they are based.”

Jill's Only Mistake

Jill made one mistake in handling this situation: She waited much too long before acting on Ted's tardiness. Consequently, the problem spread to others. But once she faced the need to address the problem, she handled it well. She didn't use her position as team leader to demand that her peers change their behavior, with the implication that her role on the team would allow her to go to their boss or even the team's sponsor and complain. Rather, she used her knowledge of her colleagues and the ground rules set at the start of the project; she also reminded each of the problem team participants about how he or she would be regarded by colleagues if they continued to violate the very ground rules they had agreed to support.

Counseling Marginal Performers

Let's look at more traditional counseling situations, like helping marginal employees turn around their performance. For instance, Margo showed little or no interest in her work. Her manager, Lois, was frustrated each morning as she walked into the department. Margo would be at her desk fixing her nails or adjusting her hair. It seemed to take her forever to complete the letters that needed to be written and copied and then inserted into envelopes. Her in-box had numerous letters that hadn't yet been retrieved, but they were nothing compared to the stack of opened customer letters on her desk that had to be filed.

Lois had hoped that Margo would stop dawdling and really get to work once the company entered into its busy season, but that hadn't been the case. Margo simply wasn't doing the work as quickly as she should. Lois hadn't ignored the problem. She had discussed the situation with Margo during coaching sessions. She had said, "Work is piling up on your desk and you need to do it to ensure office productivity. Are you having a problem?" Margo had assured her that all was well, and everything was getting done on schedule. Lois couldn't complain about any errors Margo was making—there were no problems in her handling of customer accounts. Still, Lois couldn't allow Margo to plod through her work assignments while other clerks in the department seemed to be working on overdrive. After several months, Lois decided that a more serious talk was called for, and she called Lois into the office for counseling.

Lois: Margo, I guess I haven't been as clear as I should have been. You are taking too long to complete your work. You are more experienced than many of your peers, and you should be able to work faster, but you just let the work pile up.

Margo [annoyed]: It gets done, doesn't it?

Lois: Yes, it does, but if you focused on your job more, you could finish more work during the day. I can't ask your peers to take on any added work—they lack the know-how that you have—and are just managing to juggle their work assignments. . .

Margo [interrupting]: I see no reason for me to assume more work than the others. We're all paid the same!

Lois: Yes, Margo, that's true. And you aren't likely to move beyond your current job and salary if you don't demonstrate that you are capable of doing more than you are. Your current job performance is holding you back from consideration for more than a cost-of-living salary increase and even advancement.

Margo: I'd like a decent raise, that's for sure. Can you promise me a 10 percent raise if I took on more work?

Lois: No, I can't promise that. But I can certainly promise that I would acknowledge your improvement in job performance in your appraisal at the end of the year.

Margo: Lois, I'd like the raise. But, to be truthful, I am bored with what I do day after day. I wouldn't mind taking on more work but I don't really want to do more of the same. Aren't there other tasks I could be assigned to do?

Lois: Would you be willing to take on new duties and responsibilities, in addition to your current workload?

Margo: Yes, I would—what do you have in mind? [a little wary of where the conversation was heading].

Lois: I've been asked to conduct some customer surveys, and I will need one of the clerks to help me. I had been putting off the work because your colleagues seem overburdened, and I didn't think you would want to help. But this work is just right for you to do. Your familiarity with the company will help tremendously.

Lois then went on to discuss the project and Margo's role. Margo seemed genuinely interested—for the first time in over six months. And

the new tasks she was assigned seemed to energize her. During a follow-up counseling meeting, Lois could tell Margo how pleased she was in the flow of customer replies off Margo's desk, her handling of incoming mail, and cleaner desk. "The work is being done faster yet still efficiently," she told Margo. "As important, I am delighted with the work you are doing on the customer surveys."

Margo still began the day by checking her nails and hair, but as soon as she was at her desk, she was all business. Lois had no reason to fault her job performance, and Margo soon was off counseling. But Lois continued to provide Margo with feedback—both on her regular work and her work on the surveys.

Think about how Lois handled this situation. She solved the performance problem, but likely she could have done so much sooner—even in coaching—had she probed further than she did. Margo could have bypassed her boredom, assumed more work, and increased the flow of work for which she was responsible. However, in her counseling session with Margo, Lois did do as she should; that is, she objectively described the situation, including why it could not continue, and she identified the impact Margo's productivity was having on the group's performance as a whole—less experienced workers were being overburdened because Margo was not taking on the level of work her job experience allowed her to handle. More important, Lois listened to Margo about why she didn't just want to be stuck with more of the same routine tasks she currently did. Finally, Lois came up with a realistic solution to the problem, one that would re-motivate Margo and also help Lois complete an assignment that senior management was anxious to have done.

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Clearly, the matter between Margo and Lois was about job performance. Not all counseling sessions are directly related to that. Take the session between Gordon and Jane, his ambitious but disgruntled assistant. Jane felt that she was inadequately compensated for her work and used sarcasm and snide remarks to express her dissatisfaction with her job. Gordon had had a good working relationship with Jane until one day she returned from lunch with some old friends with whom she had worked at another company. The camaraderie that existed between Gordon and Jane disappeared from then, replaced by angry retorts and slamming file drawers.

Unlike Lois, Gordon didn't wait. He called Jane into his office and asked her what was wrong.

Jane: Gordon, I think I'm overdue for an increase.

Gordon: Jane, I wish I could put you up for one, but we have pay policies that prevent that.

Jane [whining]: My friends have jobs similar to mine, are employed by companies in the area, and they earn at least 20 to 30 percent more than I do. I don't think that's fair.

Gordon: Every situation is different. Also, there's more than one kind of compensation.

Jane [sarcasm rearing its ugly head]: Maybe, but I'll take the cash.

Gordon [grimacing]: All right, then, let's consider this from a purely financial standpoint. We know that you're ambitious. I don't know anything about your friends' companies, but I know that this firm's policy is to promote from within. Since you're one of the most valuable people in this department, you have already received some excellent performance assessments, ones that you aren't going to keep if you behave the way you have. You might be thinking that you would make more money if you left here and found another job. Maybe, but keep in mind that you would be losing the respect you already have here. And you might not get the kind of money you are currently getting if you made a fresh start elsewhere.

Jane: Maybe . . .

Gordon: Also, I can't think of any company as committed as ours to training staff. You're smart enough to know that the opportunity we offer you to take various training programs is money in the bank.

Jane: Still . . .

Gordon: Another thing. Most assistants at other organizations don't enjoy the unique status that admins do here. You attend sales meetings, you are a member of project teams, you have cubicles and mini-offices in which to work. And you are less regimented than other employees, with flexible work hours, lunch periods, and the like.

Jane: Still . . .

Gordon: Wait a minute—let me finish. I think I am a pretty good supervisor as supervisors go, too. I'm patient and caring and concerned about your professional advancement. I wouldn't be

sitting here with you talking about your recent attitude if I didn't care about your position with the organization.

Jane: I guess I have been difficult to work with lately.

Gordon: Yes, you have. I hope that you can think about the things I've discussed and demonstrate the professional attitude I expect from a staff member. Unless the problem reappears, I don't think we need to talk about the situation again. I do have to keep a written record of our discussion, but I believe that you understand our current situation and will be patient. Your time will come if you give it a chance.

Note that Gordon didn't promise Jane a huge raise to change her attitudinal behavior. Bribery, which is what that would have been, isn't a lasting solution to any problem. Gordon appreciated how Jane might feel after comparing compensation with former colleagues and how she might be looking for greener pastures. While Gordon might not be personally responsible for the situation, she was taking her predicament out on him. Rather than lose his temper, he preferred to save a talented worker and chose to use the counseling session to persuade her to look to the blessings from her job, not focus on its shortcomings.

Behavior similar to Jane's can be due, too, to feelings that work isn't appreciated, to a perceived lack of status, and to a demand for more opportunities for visibility and involvement in problem solving and decision making.

Counseling for Violations of the Rules

Counseling sessions are very similar in the need to (1) identify the nature of the problem, (2) gain acceptance that a problem exists, (3) discuss the impact that the behavior is having on the individual's performance or that of the entire workforce, and (4) come up with an action plan to resolve the problem and a schedule of future meetings to discuss progress in addressing the behavioral problem. Let's look at how these four steps play out in a discussion between Steve and Ben over Ben's tardiness and absenteeism, both of which have been going from bad to worse. Steve calls Ben into his office.

Steve: Ben, I've been looking over your personnel folder. This is the fourth year you have been with the company and the third

department you've worked in. You did a terrific job in Finance and were moved to Credit Management as a reward for your top performance. Your work there earned you a second transfer to Accounts Receivable. However, your work was poor. You asked for a transfer and you were moved to Accounts Payable. Since you have been in my department, your performance has been barely acceptable. Worse, both your attendance and arrival times to work have become serious problems.

Ben: Steve, I think I'm doing an acceptable job. As far as my absenteeism and tardiness, I explained that I have had some car problems, which are responsible for both.

Steve: Obviously, the car problems are new. When you were in Finance, your record for promptness and attendance were commendatory. While in Credit Management, you weren't absent a single day, and you were never late. When you were in Accounts Receivable, you were out sick often—usually Mondays or Fridays. You came into the office as late as 10:00 A.M. In my department—well—the record is even worse—it's unacceptable. And I question your explanation that you are having car problems.

Ben: I told you my car is a wreck, and I can't afford a new one.

Steve: That may be a part of the problem, but I think there is more to it. Your record proves that you can do superior work and maintain a record of good attendance and timeliness. I also find it interesting that your absenteeism is often around the weekend. As a manager, I've found that behavior like yours is usually attributable to either lack of ability, which I don't think is the problem, or a problem with your supervisor or co-workers. If either of those situations is causing you a problem, I wish you would discuss it with me.

Ben: Oh, no. I like the people I work with, and I think that you're a fair supervisor.

Steve: Thank you. What about the work itself?

Ben [hesitating]: I guess it's okay.

Steve: You guess. You did outstanding work in Finance and later in Credit Management.

Ben: I really liked my jobs in those departments. The work was interesting.

Steve: What about the work in Accounts Receivable?

Ben: I hated it!

Steve: And Accounts Payable, my department?

Ben: Well . . . [hesitating].

Steve: You're not that interested in it, right?

Ben: It's boring. I spend the day at a computer keyboard entering figures. It's as bad as Accounts Receivable, maybe even worse.

Steve: You clearly are good with number-crunching. Suppose I changed your responsibilities. Instead of posting numbers, I assigned you to analyzing the financials as they are reported. Would that interest you?

Ben: Definitely!!!

Steve: All right, let's try it. I'm guessing that your excessive absences and lateness were tied to your feelings about your job. If you do well with your new responsibilities and your attendance improves, then we'll both be happier. If there's no improvement, then, I'm sorry to tell you, Ben, that I would have to let you go.

Ben: Yes.

Steve: Let's set up a time tomorrow to review your new responsibilities. I also want to set up a time in thirty days to review both your job performance and attendance. I assume by then that you will also have addressed any problems you might have with your car. I'll be looking for signs of improvement to show that we're on the right track. But, even with an improvement during the next four weeks, I'll be checking your attendance records regularly to be sure that the problem has been solved.

Steve didn't deny Ben's explanation, but he did have documentation to demonstrate that the problem seemed to be tied to the change in responsibility as Ben moved from one department to another. Ben could not deny the documentation that showed that a problem existed. As far as the cause of the problem, Steve probed gently to help Ben admit the nature of the problem. Once he understood the problem, he could recommend a solution. Ideally, a better approach might have been to ask Ben how the job might be made more interesting, but the nature of Ben's performance problem really required that Steve take the lead in recommending a solution.

Observe how Steve made it clear to Ben that termination might be the only choice left if Ben's absenteeism and tardiness continued with the change in responsibilities. If Ben continues to be out and late, Steve will need to act on his statement and fire Ben. Steve's department cannot operate with someone on whom the supervisor and staff can't rely.

Does the situation end happily? In most instances, if the problem is attributable to the nature of the work, then the change in assignment should have worked. But let's assume that it doesn't work, that Ben's behavior is due to an attitude problem. He's been moved from one department to another and it has made him angry. He has been punishing the company by being late and even not going into work, hoping that his absence will disrupt workflow and make the company aware of how important he is. So, one month later, Steve meets again with Ben.

Steve: Sit down, Ben. I've been looking over your attendance record. There has been little improvement. You also continue to be late. Your change in work assignment seems to be going smoothly, but the problem that justified the need for counseling hasn't been solved. Under these circumstances, I'm sorry to say that I will have to terminate you.

Ben: You have no right to do that. My work here has improved. I know the company, and I make a solid contribution to the department. So I was late a few days during the month. I was only out three days.

Steve: While that is less than in the past, it is a continuation of the previous pattern. Each absence enabled you to take a long weekend. In one instance, you told me, "I didn't sleep well and didn't feel up to coming to work." On the second occasion, you complained that you had had a headache. On the last occasion, you told me, "I just didn't feel good." I'm sorry but those aren't sufficient cause for your continued absences.

Ben: Steve, this company has treated me shabbily, moving me from one department to another, never concerned about how happy I was in Finance. You all have been unfair.

Steve: I tried to find more interesting work within my department for you, but your absences continued. I'm truly unhappy to see you leave but your problem is affecting department productivity and that can't continue.

Ben [shocked]: Steve, I promise that I'll . . .

Steve: Ben, I can understand how you feel. I wish you the best of luck with your next employer. The Human Resources Department has been notified about the situation, and Sam, from HR, will be here to take you upstairs to discuss any compensation for unused vacation time, the continuation of health and life insurance benefits, and the like.

Ben: Please, Steve, reconsider.

Steve: The decision is final.

Since Ben was clearly upset, Steve excused himself to give Ben time to regain his composure.

Did you notice that Steve never said, "I'm sorry"? It would have implied that he or the company had done something wrong to Ben. Steve accepted that he would be the bearer of bad news, and did his job as a manager in letting Ben know that he was being fired for his shoddy attendance record.

After Ben went off to the human resources department with the HR manager, Steve recorded the meeting with Ben.

Ben falls into two categories of employee for counseling: he was a rule violator, playing free and loose with the company's attendance rules, and also someone with an attitude problem. The latter came out only after his supervisor had made an effort to turn around the situation. More often, the problem is noticeable from the start.

Counseling for Attitude Problems

Often employees with attitude problems do good work. Their problem is a matter of attitude, not ability. For instance, taking orders—no matter how respectfully and politely they are given—can be very difficult for some people, and they become surly and uncooperative. You can't ignore behavior like this or other examples of negative attitudes.

As a manager, you will likely encounter one or more of these individuals with attitude problems during your career. The secret in counseling them is not to talk about their attitudes but rather to focus on the behaviors that result. Not only is it easier to resolve such problems but it is also easier to make a case for dismissal based on behavior associated with the attitude problem. Think about the case with Ben. Steve couldn't argue

that Ben had a grudge against the company for the many times it disrupted his work life, but he could point to attendance and lateness issues.

Steve was also able to document those specific instances in which Ben's behavior interfered with or disrupted work. Clearly, you can't tell someone with an attitude problem, "Your attitude has got to change." It wouldn't accomplish anything. However, if you can have a serious discussion about how the employee's behavior has caused several problematic situations, you are apt to get the employee's attention and have him or her admit that a problem does exist. Although the problem may not be one of performance, you still must make clear to the employee that his or her future with the organization is uncertain at best if the behavior continues. Termination—in spite of the good work performance—will become a distinct possibility. If you consider the kinds of performance problems that attitudinal issues can cause, you can appreciate why termination may be a consequence if no change is forthcoming.

Malicious Disobedience

You've met Ben earlier in this chapter. Phil is another individual with an attitude problem. Asked to send out warning letters to a list of customers with delinquent accounts, Phil did so. Although he had been told by another employee that there had been a mix-up with a number of the accounts and that a revised list of customers was being put together, he still sent out the letters to the old list. Phil's firm received considerable calls from upset customers as a result of his act. Some customers were so upset that they threatened to change suppliers.

Phil did it because he had been *ordered* to complete the mailing. Malicious disobedience—that is, following instructions to the letter regardless of the consequences—is often the way he responds to being told what to do. As his manager, you would have a tough time placing blame, particularly if you had been the individual who had instructed him to send off the letters. You would have only had the word of the other worker that Phil knew better than to use the original list.

What should you do? Since disciplinary action would be very hard to take in this instance, you need to meet with Phil to determine why he behaved in this manner. Usually the reason for malicious disobedience can be found in a grudge against either you or the company. You need to put yourself in Phil's place and try to remember anything that has happened that could cause such resentment. Was Phil passed up for a promotion? Is the person's raise overdue? Does the company generally

maintain a rank-conscious attitude toward staff and he is at the bottom of the hierarchy and treated accordingly? Do you treat him that way?

The goal of counseling here is to get to the reason behind the behavior. Treating the symptoms will not cure the disease. The root of the problem must be uncovered. If it is found to be in the relationship between you and Phil, then half of your battle is won, provided you can improve the relationship and create an environment more conducive to a positive work situation.

Passive Aggression

Let's look at another attitudinal type. Passive-aggressives deal with feelings of anger and frustration by eliciting these feelings in others, thereby appearing to be the victim of the other's irrational behavior. They hear only what they want to hear and purposefully forget what you need them to remember. If you ask them to come over or to complete a task quickly, they will deliberately take their time. If you don't nag them regularly, they won't get their work done.

Passive aggression is one of the toughest attitudinal problems to counsel. These people seem responsive to your advice. They may even improve in performance over the short term. But unless you watch them like a hawk, they will exhibit previous misbehavior or fall back to their lower level of performance. Let's look at how you need to counsel these individuals.

As mentioned, your first step is to document the behavior of the person with an attitude problem. Narrow the issue to the specific problem or concern. Write down the specific verbal and physical behaviors and actions that concern you. Check, too, the frequency of such misconduct and its impact on workflow and colleagues' performance. When you meet with the employee, discuss the situation. Determine whether the individual has a logical reason for the behavior. If you can't get to the cause of the problem, don't think you can't resolve the problem. Describe the behaviors you don't want and tell the employee clearly and succinctly to stop doing what he or she is doing. Follow this up with a description of the preferred behavior—like cooperation, helpfulness, and courteousness.

Let's look at each of these steps more closely.

1. *Narrow the issue to the specific problem or concern.* Identify the specific type of behavior that the attitude leads to, like careless-

- ness or inattention to work, or insensitivity to others, or rudeness.
2. *Note in writing the specific verbal and physical behaviors and actions that have triggered counseling.* Don't forget to record non-verbal behaviors like the rolling of eyes, the clenching of fists, the staring into space, and so forth. See yourself as a movie camera or a tape recorder as you report exactly the behavior of the employee.
 3. *Indicate the frequency of the behavior.* Know how often the various behaviors that concern you arise.
 4. *Report the impact.* Make a list of the good business reasons that the behavior must end; that is, how it is impacting the performance of the individual or productivity of the entire work team.
 5. *Meet with the employee to discuss the situation.* Be sure that the employee understands how the behavior is causing a problem.
 6. *Hear out the employee.* He or she may be unaware of what is happening. It may also turn out that the attitude problem you've identified is a symptom of some more serious problem that needs a referral to the employee assistance program.
 7. *Be clear that you want the behavior to stop.* Too often, managers don't do this. But you must specifically tell the person to stop doing whatever it is he or she is doing.
 8. *Explain the kind of behavior you want instead.* This is a step that many managers ignore. They assume that they must live with what the employee is doing. Not so. Managers have too much stress on them already. Every organization and manager has the right to demand that everyone who is on the staff behave in a courteous, cooperative, and helpful manner. If the employee refuses, be clear about the consequences of continuation of their poor behavior.

Other Attitude Problems

We've considered some of the attitudinal problems you may encounter. But, unfortunately, there are many others that you may have to address as a manager, like:

- *Naysayers.* These staff members can be toxic to any creative thinking in your group. Unless they are kept on a tight leash (or excluded

from brainstorming sessions), you can count on them to ignore the pluses and point out the minuses every time someone in the group suggests an operational improvement.

- *Worrywarts*. These employees are in their glory when they can walk about the department prophesizing doom and gloom.
- *Jokesters*. There are jokes and good-natured laughter, and then there is barbed humor that wounds co-workers and members of management, including you. Out of control, a steady barrage of ill-timed humor can derail a team's train of thought, diminish the importance of a critical decision, or destroy team camaraderie.
- *Know-It-Alls*. These opinionated, outspoken staff members think they have all the answers. They may be valuable staff members, but their huge egos make them irritating and counterproductive co-workers.
- *"No" People*. These workers see no good in anything that is done. And, unfortunately, they seem to have the uncanny ability to extinguish positive thinking in others and smother creative ideas before they catch fire.
- *Whiners*. These staff members wallow in their woes and carry the weight of the world on their shoulders. Their behavior would be tolerable if they complained for the purpose of drawing attention to problems and if they offered solutions along with their complaints. Their behavior would even be acceptable if it were therapeutic, designed to help them cope with their frustrations. But these whiners' wallowing goes on and on and has no purpose.

Many managers tell me that they don't really know what kinds of action steps they can take with each of the individuals described here—from the naysayers to the jokesters to the worrywarts. Here are some suggestions.

- If you have a *naysayer* on staff, learn to disregard his or her negative comments. Become deaf to those remarks. Better yet, challenge your naysayer before his or her peers to come up with a solution to the problem, not simply criticize your action plan.
- If you have a *worrywart* on staff, minimize the opportunities that he or she has to react to bad news by delivering bad news with a positive spin. If you see one building fear in others, hold a staff meeting to address openly and honestly staff members' fears.
- Say Carl is the *jokester* on your staff. He doesn't just joke with co-workers, he finds cause to laugh at others' expense. Don't follow your

subordinates' example. Rather, set a good example yourself and not laugh. More important, sit down with Carl and describe situations and subjects that are off-limits to humor, regardless of the intent. Don't argue the case—instead, emphasize the negative consequences of the alleged humor and leave it at that. Make clear that continuation of such behavior will lead to Carl's dismissal.

- *Know-it-alls* are another case altogether. Actually, they can be helpful so long as they don't try to take over. Minimize their participation if you expect them to drown out everyone's creativity. If they come up with good ideas, look for ways to combine theirs with the ideas of other members of the team.

- With a team member who *says no* to everyone's idea, your goal should be to move from fault finding to problem solving, from negativity to creativity and innovation. Toward this, be aware that trying to convince an employee that an idea will work often encourages him or her to become even more critical. Think of one of those B-Westerns in which a horse and rider are sinking in quicksand. The harder the horse struggles to get out, the more embedded he and his rider become.

With people who can only say no to others' ideas (carriers of Not Invented Here syndrome), it is better to ask them to research a subject. Use them as smoke detectors or warning devices to alert you to real problems. If your no-person rejects your idea or that of another, suggest that he or she come up with a better idea. You never know—the person may come up with a winner.

The person also may rethink that no-position if you allow time. While you may be tempted to exclude the individual from further discussion of a problem and the proposed solution, the wiser course of action may be to give the person time to think so he or she can come back in when in agreement with you and the team. You might say, "When you think of a solution, get back to me," or "Why don't you think about this for awhile and report back to me with any ideas that you have for overcoming the problems you see with our solution?"

- With a *whining individual*, here's a word of warning: be alert that the condition doesn't rub off on you. Your problem performer can cause you to agonize about his or her presence on your staff to colleagues—in other words, whine about your staff whiner. To support the whiner's efforts to change his or her behavior, don't agree with his or her complaints. Neither should you disagree with them—that will only compel him or her to repeat his or her problems or feelings. If the whiner

has a personal problem, send him or her to the employee assistance counselor; don't try to solve his or her problem.

Don't discount everything that a whiner says. For instance, if a whiner has a complaint with operations, listen for the main points of the complaint. Like naysayers and know-it-alls, and others mentioned in this chapter, the whiner may actually be on to something worthy of your attention. Take command of the conversation and get specific, asking for the whiner's help. Ask questions that will clarify the whiner's viewpoint, then see if you and the whiner can come up with some real solutions.

If this effort does not produce any real change in a whiner, and you have met often to counsel him or her about the impact this behavior is having on the operation, then it may be time to issue a warning that termination may be necessary owing to the impact of that behavior on workflow and staff morale.

In situations involving troublesome and troubled employees, there may be strong temptation to lose your temper and rant and rage. Instead, think about the consequences of such actions. Even in an organization with employment-at-will, termination done in anger can have serious legal consequences. Better to calm yourself, seek advice from your human resources department, and then prepare for a counseling meeting to demonstrate that you made an effort to turn around the behavioral problem. After that, follow the instructions in this chapter and the ones before and the one after to ensure that you made a serious effort to save the employee.

If you have no other option but to terminate the employee, do so but demonstrate a caring attitude toward the person. It will minimize the likelihood of litigious action against your organization or you.