



# Addressing Behavior – Not Attitude

How many times have you heard the phrase, “He or she has a bad attitude?” It’s an expression we hear much too often in today’s workplace. So as leaders, what action can we take when someone has “a bad attitude”? How do we address the attitude of an employee? What is an attitude anyway? Can attitude be measured? Can it be defined? Can “a bad attitude” be described on a piece of paper? What does it look like, smell like, taste like?

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# Introduction

**How many times have you heard the phrase, “He or she has a bad attitude?” It’s an expression we hear much too often in today’s workplace. So as leaders, what action can we take when someone has “a bad attitude”? How do we address the attitude of an employee? What is an attitude anyway? Can attitude be measured? Can it be defined? Can “a bad attitude” be described on a piece of paper? What does it look like, smell like, taste like?**

**Attitude is a very hard thing to measure. It can be vague and hard to define at best. More often than not, attitude is the wrong target of our attention. “Behavior” is important to us as leaders. The behavior that our employees exhibit in the workplace should be our area of focus.**

## Define behavior and attitude

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines behavior as “1a: the manner of conducting oneself. b: the response of an individual to its environment. 2: the way in which someone behaves.” Attitude is defined as “1a: position assumed for a specific purpose. b: a mental position with regard to a fact or state. c: a negative or hostile state of mind. d: a cocky or arrogant manner.” Attitude is a frame of mind, while behavior can be seen. You may notice someone behaving poorly and make the comment “that employee has a bad attitude,” when in effect the employee is exhibiting poor behavior. One might say we are just playing with words, but tell an employee that he has a bad attitude without providing specific examples of his behavior and see how well that argument goes over.

Appropriate behavior is reflected when staff members treat customers with dignity and respect. Little things like greeting customers in a friendly manner, smiling, and introducing yourself makes customers feel welcome. Other examples of good behavior include listening carefully to what customers have to say apologizing for any problems or inconveniences without placing blame, thanking customers for choosing your services, treating everyone with respect, and speaking well of the organization.

If an organization’s goal is to provide the highest quality of service and to meet customer needs with care and dignity, then this commitment should be reflected in the staff’s behavior.

## Set clear expectations

It is essential that leaders set clear expectations for behavior. Develop a set of well-defined, measurable, realistic behavior expectations at the beginning of the employment relationship. Create a culture of high goals by placing your expectations in writing. Solicit input regarding behavior standards from all parties involved. There is no better way to gain support than to include the key players from the start.

How do you start to develop behavior standards? Behavior standards should be based on the values of your organization and/or department. What values do you want to represent and what behaviors best reflect those values? If no values are present, core values must be developed. Don’t be like many who believe that you must write a magnificent document to demonstrate your values. Standards can only be lived if they are known and incorporated into your daily business routines, so keep it simple.

The real challenge is not in developing a set of values and behavior standards, but in living them everyday. Don’t ask others to do what you yourself would not do.

## Walk the talk

Once you have developed these standards, you must hold yourself accountable to them. If you are faking, it is only rational that people need to hear thank you when you want them to continue with the effort that they are providing. They deserve special recognition

for extra effort. By thanking them, you are providing additional confirmation that your staff needs. your peers will know. You will lose all credibility and will certainly fail.

You must set the example. Keep promises and follow through. Do what you say you will do. If not, your actions will not be seen as authentic and your credibility will perish. Be truthful and sincere. You must lead by example. Recognize that at times conflicts among staff will exist and that these situations should be handled professionally. Try to set aside differences when resolving these issues and be tolerant.

If you make a mistake, admit it. Your staff will respect you more for being straightforward and will recognize that we all have personal strengths and weaknesses. Be honest in all interactions.

Take a look in the mirror. Can you look at yourself and say that you are doing the right thing? Are you treating others with dignity and respect? Are you following the standards of behavior? Are you being considerate? Are you being supportive? Always remember that the values of the organization are only as good as your own values.

## Reinforce positive behavior

Have you ever been in line at a store and a cashier says, "Thank you for shopping here, have a great day!"? How many times have you heard this comment and just knew that the person saying it was not sincere? If you stood there awhile you would notice it was said to every person, with the same tone, sometimes not even looking the person in the eye while talking. Try to keep in mind how you felt and do not make the same mistake with your staff.

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Praise your employees. It is only rational that people need to hear thank you when you want them to continue with the effort that they are providing. They deserve special recognition for extra effort. By thanking them, you are providing additional confirmation that your staff needs. You must be sincere. You have to be genuinely glad about their achievement.

Look for the best in everyone. It is human nature to look for the bad rather than to recognize the good in people. Acknowledge the hard work and dedication of your staff. Stress the importance of their contribution to the organization.

Make sure you thank your staff in a variety of ways. Not everyone accepts praise the same way. Remember the first "thank you" given is the toughest. In addition to the positive response you receive from the employees, you will gain personal benefits. It's fun! Smiles are contagious.

## Identify unacceptable behavior

Everyday we see a myriad of behaviors that we view as being unacceptable in the environment in which it is displayed. Our kids fight among themselves over petty issues at home. We read of violence in our cities, road rage on the highways, acts of terrorism throughout the globe. Then we come to work and watch employees exhibit the same behavior. Maybe their behavior is not as demonstrative as fighting, terrorism or destruction, but their acts cause great destruction to the morale and efficiencies of our companies.

Leaders must establish a firm definition of what are acceptable behaviors in our workplace, and which ones are not. Until we establish this primary definition, we have no basis for correction. Unacceptable behavior is not as easy to identify as poor performance. Normally performance issues can be measured by some form of yardstick, while behavior is much less tangible. Specific details to justify your position are the single most important piece of your presentation. Without specifics, you are wasting your time and setting yourself up for an embarrassing encounter. Always focus on your goal - correcting this behavior. Before you can shed light on what must improve, you must clearly define what is wrong!

Specifics should include the what, when, where, who, and how of the event that led you to confront someone regarding his behavior. For every question you ask yourself, and answer, be prepared to clearly define your expectations for change.

## Do it now - don't let it fester

Maybe the number one mistake for leaders in dealing with behavioral issues is procrastination. Confrontation of any type requires skill, patience, careful planning, and proper preparation, but dealing with behavior can be much more challenging. Allowing a situation to continue can irritate an otherwise smooth workplace and sends the message that the behavior will be tolerated. Failing to respond when you observe problem behavior allows the behavior to persist and often leads to other unacceptable behaviors. The behavior may

appear on the surface to be insignificant, but over time even small infractions of the rules can become major sources of irritation and dissatisfaction. If left unchecked, these irritants will undoubtedly develop into much larger complications.

**Failure to address unacceptable behaviors will be viewed as your condoning the behavior. Once the assumption is made that the behavior is acceptable it will spread like wildfire.**

All too often, well-intentioned leaders avoid confrontation because they do not feel the behavior warrants their time. This lack of sensitivity toward these issues allows the situation to worsen, which grows throughout the workplace like a plague infecting everyone in its path. The competent leader will take a pro-active stance and address these issues immediately upon gathering all the facts.

Many times we avoid these issues because of fear - fear that we may be embarrassed, fear that this may end up in a shouting match, fear of making someone mad, or even fear of bodily harm. Ask yourself this question, "Are these fears more important to me than the respect of my employees?" You may wonder how this question may apply. In every workplace there are those employees who do excellent work, are always positive, dependable, and are willing to do anything you ask. These are the people we count on daily to carry the ball and get the majority of the work done. Then we have others who come to work late, are absent frequently, who spread rumors, gripe and complain about every change, and who just do not produce quality results. Of these two groups, which ones do you really care about? Your stars, of course. Therefore, when you neglect the behavior of your problem employees, your star employees feel the effects because they naturally take up the slack.

Remember, they will be watching to see how you respond to situations. It will also spark a wave of employees testing the limits just to see what you truly stand for. The key is to be consistent, don't procrastinate, and by all means don't be afraid to ruffle a few feathers.

## **Use logic - not emotions - to guide you**

Successful leaders never let emotions run their mouth. As humans we are very emotional beings but we also have been given one of the greatest gifts in the universe - logic. The successful manager will learn early on to think before reacting. When confronting others always use logic as your guide and never your emotions. If you are angry, walk away. Only bad judgments are made when emotions fuel our actions.

You must become familiar with your emotional triggers and how easily they can be activated. Reflect on why you are getting angry. Was it the incident itself that upsets you or is this an automatic response to a situation based on a prior experience? Are you reacting to the individual or the issue? Do you perceive it as a personal attack? Are your personal values clouding your judgment? You will often be required to think quickly and process information spontaneously. Therefore, you must prepare yourself for these challenges before they occur. By knowing what causes you to react in certain situations you will be able to more effectively deal with the issues that arise.

Learn to separate yourself from the situation. You must not take everything personally. Most of the time staff members are upset over the situation and are not upset with you as an individual. Learn to empathize not sympathize with staff members. We all have both good and bad baggage that we bring to work with us, but no one can truly understand exactly what another is experiencing.

Logic equals facts, so gather your facts as best you can and then respond appropriately to the issues. A good rule of thumb is "Don't feel it, think it."

## **Beware the pot stirrers**

At some point in our lives we have all known one: the person who is continually keeping the apple cart turned over, constantly instigating, irritating, infesting. These people are the ones we call the "pot stirrers."

They always work behind the scenes. They never come directly to you with their issues. They always run to other staff members and get them all in a tizzy. It's usually hard to gather the facts on these employees. They know how to cover their tracks. They can be your most dangerous enemy and the most difficult to deal with. Good documentation and thorough feedback is critical in dealing with these employees. You must be able to identify the damage they cause and

learn how to manage them. They are like termites. They do damage over time. If you don't take care of them, they will infest the whole group and will undermine the foundation of your team and eat away at the structure. Try to keep new employees away from them. Don't use them in key roles in your organization. Try to redirect their energies on positive aspects of their job and if possible have them work in a more secluded setting. Expose them for what they are and try to focus on the strengths of the employees that they are trying to "work" on. Once your other staff members recognize this employee for what he is, he will have a lot harder time "stirring the pot."

## Face the constant complainer

Leaders deal with a variety of individuals but one of the most challenging is the constant complainer. You know him, the individual who appears in your office on a daily basis with "constructive" criticism of everyone and everything that comes down the pike. He knows everything that is going on and can't wait to be the first to tell you. He takes pride in bringing issues to your attention and feels it is his God-given right to do so.

**Unlike the pot stirrers the constant complainers are easily identified. You will become so familiar with them you will want to run and hide when you see them coming. So, how do you handle these individuals? Listen to what they have to say and hear them.**

This can be difficult when you find their behavior to be a nuisance. But they often have legitimate concerns which need to be addressed.

You must always treat them with respect when they come to you with perceived issues. Your best course of action is to establish the expectations you have for them when they bring issues to your attention. Start by thanking them for their interest and then let them know that when bringing issues forward you expect them to have possible solutions ready for discussion. By involving one in the solution you may change a complainer into a useful ally. Maybe all they really want is to feel needed and appreciated. The seasoned leader will not hide from the constant complainers, but will re-direct their energy into creating useful solutions to the problems they attempt to lay on your desk!

## Don't ignore 90-day wonders

We have all seen these folks. They look great the first ninety days (usually your introductory period) and become a nightmare on day ninety-one! Assess your hiring procedure. How did I choose this employee? How do I deal with the issue now? Even though you are busy and feel you really don't have time, you must stop and spend attention here.

Don't pass the problem employee off to someone else just to get the problem out of your hair. You must act quickly and decisively. Make it clear to the employee that he either improves or is out the door. As always, good documentation is critical.

One way to avoid this problem is to identify these employees prior to the end of their introductory period. If no introductory period exists in your organization, implement one. It is sometimes hard to identify them because initially what you see may not be what they are. This is why it is so important for you or a trusted staff member (someone you have identified as being a leader in your area) to spend quality time on the job with this person. Get to know him, not only from a professional level, but a personal level as well. This will help you better understand the personality of the employee. Keep your eyes open.

Remember we all make a wrong selection at some time or another. The key here is to accept the responsibility and correct the situation. We all learn from our mistakes and hopefully do not repeat them.

## Know some basics before your conversation

Confrontation is a learned task, similar to public speaking or writing. You have to develop your skills over time and with practice. It is not only important to say the right things, but it is equally important to do the right things. Environmental distractions or barriers can play just as much a role in the success of your confrontation as the words themselves.

There are many options to consider in planning your discussion. Should this meeting be conducted in an office, a conference room, over lunch, off-site, etc.? Conducting a meeting in your office places you in control of the situation, but often makes employees extremely nervous. Meeting in a neutral location may avoid those feelings. Do you need a management witness? Often company policy or labor contracts will dictate that a witness is present during this type of session. Some employers allow the employee to also bring someone of their choice.

How should the room be arranged? Do you need to leave a way out in case things get out of hand? Avoid outside distractions. Forward phones, turn pagers on vibrate, alert any support staff that you are not to be disturbed. What time of the day should you meet? Do you feel the employee can go back to the workplace and deal appropriately with what just happened or should the meeting take place at the end of the day?

The strong leader will prepare all the specifics prior to the meeting, arranged in a logical manner, with documentation to support your position if at all possible. The best interactions result from a well thought out “script” that is played out in the leader’s mind prior to the meeting. If you plan to have another leader attend the meeting with you, go over what you plan to say in advance of the interaction. To stay focused on the matter at hand, prepare a list of objectives or expected outcomes from the meeting. Confrontational meetings can easily stray from the point unless you are well prepared and have specific outcomes in mind. However, refrain from developing a script that does not allow flexibility to follow the conversation to wherever it may lead.

## The meeting!

OK, so you’ve done your homework, you set specific behavior expectations for your employees, you exemplify the culture you are trying to create, you’ve spent time reinforcing those who perform well, but you still have those few who just don’t seem to get with the program. After identifying the specifics of his unacceptable behavior, you have prepared your documentation, placed all your facts in order, and are now ready to sit down and have a conversation with your number one problem employee. What do you say?

There are several “tactics” a leader can use to confront an employee on an issue. The best advice is to adopt a style that works for you. Some leaders feel they have to be in control, others will allow the employee unlimited time to vent frustration, others will have a script that they do not vary from, while others will do it “from the hip.” One might argue that the best approach is a mixture of those mentioned above, and may well be varied depending upon the employee and /or the topic of conversation. One approach that seems to work well and can be adapted to almost any situation is the “sandwich” approach. Visualize a sandwich, two pieces of bread with some sort of filler in the middle that you do not care for. In the same fashion, your meeting may start out by pointing out the strengths that this person brings to the table. You must be sincere here! Any false attempt at making someone feel good will poison your entire approach. Follow the praise by focusing specifically

on the behavior problems at hand. Allow ample time for the employee to state their concerns and give them your full attention. End your meeting by reassuring the employee of your confidence in their ability to overcome these hurdles and setting clear expectations on how they can improve. You must clearly define what will take place if this behavior continues and be prepared to “stick to it.” Involving the employee in the solution is an effective means to establish a plan of correction. Inquire about the ideas he has that may help him improve.

## Avoid common mistakes

Although most of us learn best from the mistakes we have made there are some mistakes which should be avoided if possible when addressing behavior issues.

Letting your mouth work independent of your brain is another common mistake to which managers often succumb. You must always process the information that comes to you before making comments. The best method for processing information is to hear what is being said instead of just listening. To do this, you must hear with not only open ears but also with an open mind. Do not prejudge the outcome of your conversation before it begins or to forget to listen to the employee’s side of things. Remember also to not take what is said personally.

**A common mistake made by managers is to spend too much time on the positive behaviors during the same meeting they are discussing the negative. While well-intentioned, this sends mixed signals to the employee. You must not lose focus on the issue you are trying to resolve.**

Some additional pointers to help eliminate making mistakes when addressing behavior include being prepared before addressing the issue, not waiting until the issue is a full-blown disaster before trying to resolve it, and never airing your concerns about a particular employee in a public arena.

To be seen as a true leader you must assume the role you have chosen. This is not an easy task but one that can prove to be quite rewarding. Leaders often make mistakes but should always learn from their mistakes as well as from the mistakes of others.

## Know when to cut your losses

Despite all the efforts and time you dispatch trying to help someone be successful, sometimes things just don't work. Each of us can think of a person we know who is negative no matter how good things are for him. For most of us, these are the people in our lives whom we try to avoid, seeking them out only when their interaction is necessary for some basic life function. Since that is the way our personal lives are, why should it be any different at work? Why not just rid the workplace of those who consistently bring everyone else down, and cause us to dread coming to work in the morning? The answer is, you can and you should.

Ending someone's employment is a very difficult thing to do. It usually means that we have exhausted a great deal of resources into hiring, training, coaching, developing, and attempting to correct the behavior of an employee who will not put forth the effort to change. In essence, we also have failed. Now we face the cold realization that after all these good faith efforts, we must switch gears and invoke some new tactics, designed not to improve, but to eliminate the problem from the workplace.

While this chapter is not meant to supply legal advice on this matter, a few of the following considerations should be reviewed when the decision for termination comes to the forefront. Has the employee been properly warned? Is

there anything that management promised, and did not deliver? Are there alternative options for employment that better match this employee's skill level, demeanor or abilities? Is there a champion in the organization willing to spend further resources with this employee? If the answer to all these questions is no, then a swift move to termination may be the only recourse.

Addressing employee behavior is an essential skill to becoming an effective leader. A seasoned leader sets high expectations for staff, provides thorough and on-going communication of those expectations, and develops a process of dealing with behavioral issues in a factual, timely manner when those expectations are not met. These leaders reap the rewards of high workplace morale, low turnover rates, improved efficiencies, and a much healthier work environment for all employees.

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