

## Don't Ignore the Bad Apple

Do not hold your organization hostage to a chronic toxic employee who will continue trying to rot the barrel of apples. This toxicity begins to grow and fester and, if unaddressed, can severely impede an organization's mission and effectiveness. One of our roles as a leader is to prevent negativity.

■ By Preston Ingalls

Often referred to as 'bad apples,' or as the French would say, pourri, toxic employees tend to be self-absorbed and not mindful of the effects of their negativity on their peers, customers or others. Over time, they become toxic employees and drain the energy from the team, affect morale by playing off imperfections. They see the need to share their discomfort or dissatisfaction with others or just look to do as little for the enterprise as they can get away with. They are guilty of:

- Appearing pessimistic and cynical about new projects or processes,
- Pointing out the flaws or faults with many things,
- Reduced productivity (slacking off),
- Being argumentative and disagreeable,
- Appearing entitled to more than they have,
- Lackluster performance,
- Unwillingness to work collaboratively,
- Whining and naysaying,
- Disassociation with the organization's mission.

Their motivations may stem from unhappiness with their personal life, a perception there is an imbalance between what they deserve and

what they are provided, a search for attention (negative attention is still attention) or their general mindset is skeptical and pessimistic in nature.

Sometimes, they put people down in order to feel superior to them. They may act out aggressions due to ego needs, or they simply see life differently than most (the glass half-empty). Regardless, their influence can have a serious undesirable impact on other team members and create a toxic environment.

### Nine Types of Negative Employees

Let's examine the nine types you may have:

#### *#1: The CAVEman or CAVEwoman (Citizen Against Virtually Everything)*

They are the employee who gripes about everything all the time: from the broken soda machine to the slow WIFI connection. They do not seem to be content or happy with anything. Their constant bickering often creates considerable negativity and bad energy in the workplace.

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Figure 1

### #2: The Super Delegator

They love to offload their responsibilities onto others. They complain about being overworked yet their output and yields do not match up. They look for others to shed work to.

### #3: The ICEman or ICEwoman (It is Close Enough)

The quality of work is subpar because they are inherently lazy and rather than do the right job right, they search for shortcuts and easy ways to finish quickly.

### #4: The Volcano

This is the employee who angrily flies off at the slightest provocation

at customers or fellow workers. With no anger management skills, they agitate easily.

### #5: Mr./Ms Teflon

Responsibility often slides off this person. They have many excuses why it is not their job to resolve an issue or take care of a problem.

### #6: The Maverick

This person likes to do their own thing, often avoiding suggested protocol. They slip through company policies and procedures and are a poor example to other employees.

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### #7: The Later Gator

Notoriously known for their procrastination, they put off assignments until the last minute and then surface numerous excuses as to why it was not done on time. Their motto is, “Never do today what you can put off until tomorrow.”

### #8: The Chatterbox

The Chatterbox is the gossip who talks eagerly and casually about other people. They love to spread rumors. They feel elevated because they have information others do not.

### #9: The Idler

Also known as the Slacker, they will do the absolute least work and still keep their job. They often spend work hours surfing the internet to avoid having to work. They are forever checking on their social networks and producing as little as possible as far as meaningful work. Kim Shandrow, shared in an article and infographic called *5 Types of Toxic Employees, the Impact of the Idler or Slacker* (see Figure 1)

## Preventing Negativity

Dylan Minor, an assistant professor at the Kellogg School of Management, studied the topic of toxic employees. She said, “I call them toxic because not only do they cause harm, but they also spread their behavior to others.” According to Minor’s research, people close to a toxic employee are more likely to become toxic themselves. Like the proverbial ‘bad apple’ in the bunch, the basket of good apples

is spoiled by its contact. As the apple oxidizes and turns, it causes a reaction with each apple with which it comes into contact. The toxicity begins to grow and fester and, if unaddressed, can severely impede an organization’s mission and effectiveness. One of our roles as a leader is to prevent negativity. Let’s examine how to correct it.

## Recognition

The first step is recognition or spotting the problem. Have several people complained about this person? Do you see a trend of negative reactions and statements regarding work, workplace conditions, decisions, etc.? Have you noticed or heard that in meetings they become a naysayer who criticizes every idea on the table? They may even justify it by claiming to play ‘devil’s advocate.’ The pourri is usually somewhat evident in their outward behaviors. Recognizing the symptoms of a toxic employee is the first step in addressing it. If it seems there is a problem, it is because there is a problem—act on it as a leader.

## Isolation

This is a stopgap, but you may want to isolate this person from others that they are affecting. First, it will stop the “oxidation effect,” and second, it sends a message to them and others that toxicity is unacceptable. This is a containment effort, but not a cure-all. This is more of a temporary countermeasure and is not a long-term solution. However, occasionally you have to stop the bleeding before you heal the wound.

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## Coaching

Sometimes the culprit may not understand the negative impact their behaviors have on their team members or customers. Sometimes they clearly do. Either way, they need to become aware there is an issue, its impact on others, and most importantly, the unacceptableness of those actions. The intent is to stop undesirable behavior/results by emphasizing impact of poor performance. Remember the old adage, “I do not care about your attitude, but I do care about your behavior.” It is easier to alter their behavior rather than their attitude.

It is crucial to provide feedback regarding how they are being perceived and why it is unacceptable. Do this in private. They must see the implications of continuing are not an option. Be specific with examples versus general statements. Avoid using “You are always negative” or “You never agree to anything new” or “Why do you always?”. Avoid the words always, never, etc. It is best to stay away from generalities and stick with specific events.

## Keep a Record

It is important that you record these sessions because if a course of action is to discharge them, you want to have a ‘paper trail.’ Here is a simple, seven-step coaching process that works well for these types of behaviors. You want to turn them around, but they first need to understand there is an unacceptable situation they need to correct. They may come off as strongly defending their actions (or inactions) so be prepared to stand your ground in seeking resolution:

1. Explain the discrepancy between current job performance and the previously agreed-upon expectations.
2. Specifically describe the negative effects of the employee’s performance.
3. Ask for the employee’s perspective on the situation.
4. Ask the employee for ideas on how he or she can remedy the situation and add ideas of your own.
5. Explain any steps you plan to take and what potential consequence may occur if the behavior is not corrected.
6. Agree on a plan of action and set a follow-up date to review progress.
7. Express confidence that the employee will be able to remedy the situation.

## Reinforcement

Once you have provided the coaching, it is critical that you follow up to ensure that the behavior has changed and you want to reinforce that change with recognition; if the behavior has not changed be prepared to elevate to the next step.

If they have made improvement, reinforce it with recognition and words of encouragement. Use statements like, “Charlie, I have seen considerable progress over the last few weeks. Keep it up.” Or, “Linda, we have observed you are more agreeable and helpful in the meetings and it has not gone unnoticed. Good job.” A change in behavior has to become a habit, and it is easier when the change is reinforced.

If the behavior has not suitably changed, consider using a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) that lays out very specific activities they must perform along with a 30- or 45-day deadline to accomplish it. The good thing about the PIP is it gives them specific steps that they need to follow to turn it around and a limited timeline in which to do it. Failure to comply within the deadline should not result in additional warnings; it is time to take action—start the termination process.

Look, you have provided coaching, you gave them tougher guidance and a deadline to change with the PIP, but it has not produced the necessary results. Do not hold your organization hostage to a chronic toxic employee who will continue trying to rot the barrel of apples. Take action to terminate and use the documentation you have gathered to move this destructive element out of the organization.

## Positive Change

Optimistically, you will turn this employee around with some good coaching and perhaps a little, “If you cannot change, we will have to make one.” When faced with a toxic employee, help them to see the world from other vantage points. They need to change the way they look at the job, change the way they do the job ... or change jobs. | **WA**

*For more than 48 years, **Preston Ingalls**, President and CEO of TBR Strategies (Raleigh, NC) has led maintenance and reliability improvement efforts across 30 countries for Toyota, Royal Dutch Shell, Exxon, Occidental Petroleum, Hess, Skanska, Bayer, Baxter Healthcare, Lockheed Martin, Unilever, Monsanto, Pillsbury, Corning and Texas Instruments. He consults extensively with heavy equipment fleets, heavy construction industry, and the oil and gas industry in the areas of equipment uptime and cost reduction. Preston is a contributing writer to seven trade publications, holds three degrees, has written more than 80 articles and published two e-books on lubrication. For more information, visit [www.tbr-strategies.com](http://www.tbr-strategies.com).*

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