7 Ways to Deal with a Malcontent
-- What’s that pain in my neck??

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You know who I’m talking about, too. Those people who just never seem happy; who always see the negative even when the message is positive; who suspect ulterior motives regardless of act. They are the literal “pain in your neck.”

Personally, I could recommend you just whack ‘em. That’ll please a lot of people working nearby, and you’d be surprised at the immediate effect that would have on other malcontents in the organization.

But then, we wouldn’t need this article, so here we are. You’re stuck with them, or keeping them for some reason, or simply want to help them emerge from their dark hole.

Here are some ways you can deal with these sourpusses:

1. What attitude? Typically, when you try to address an “attitude,” you get a blank, puzzled stare, and some horse hockey about they “have no idea what you’re talking about.”

So, let’s get specific. Frankly, it’s not the attitude; it’s the observable behavior that’s a problem.

“Sue, I hear you comment or complain every time we roll out a new initiative. Frankly, I want it to stop. Now. Keep it to yourself, or go speak with your supervisor. No more vocal whining to others.”

You get the idea. Freedom of speech is a protection between the individual and the state (government). Employees’ speech is not protected in the workplace; you can determine – and explicitly state – what is and isn’t acceptable in your organization. (obvious exceptions to this are harassment, retaliation, SOX disclosures, etc.)

2. Proselytizing may help. Try to convert them to your way of thinking. Be direct in your comments, and explain why it’s in their best interest to become more positive.
Let these folks know that their perceived attitudes (demonstrable, of course) are noticed by others, and certainly effect their ability to succeed in the organization.

In other words, explain the WIIFM: “What’s in it for me.”

“Janet, I want you to be more positive in your interactions with others. Your negativity is noticeable and not much fun to be around. I want to help, so let’s discuss.”

3. **Zero tolerance is the rule.** They are called “non-negotiables.”

When you decide to change a malcontent to something more positive, be specific as mentioned above, and then be prepared: you must address each and every “slip” or transgression that deviates from your discussion.

Every single instance.

No letting up, no “letting it slide.” If you do, each time it occurs you’ve “reset” the entire change process. There can be no turning back.

4. **No try, only do.** Master Yoda was right – there’s no credit for saying “I’ll try,” or “make every effort.” There’s only credit for actually doing.

You need a firm commitment from this yahoo that s/he will take immediate, positive action to correct this unacceptable behavior – not that they’ll “do their best to be more positive,” in some vague indeterminate sense.

Make it crystal clear that this is not some esoteric “hope you can do better;” it’s a must-have, a condition for future advancement, opportunities, and yes, maybe even continued employment.

5. **Close ain’t good enough** (pardon the grammar transgression, mom). To continue the thinking from 3 & 4 above, this isn’t hand grenades or horseshoes. Even when this person is making an effort, you must be diligent.

They’ve got to nail it down correctly. Coming close, even if well-intentioned, won’t work here. Remember, you could have simply tolerated the behavior as we had been doing; you chose, instead, to attempt to change it.

You must stay the course, and you must be crystal clear.

Close ain’t good enough.

6. **Inspect what you expect.** Follow-up, diligently and repeatedly.

This person needs to know that you aren’t simply “having a nice discussion.” We are discussing performance-related behaviors, we expect them to change to reach
acceptable standard, and we intend – as with any good performance management effort – to follow-up to insure those changes are implemented.

In other words, “I’ll be watching…”

This is important, for a couple of reasons: First, this employee needs to know – really, personally understand – that your expectations are for immediate, positive performance improvement. No better way to demonstrate that then being around to see it.

Second, you may actually “catch them” doing something right, in which case, that’s a super time for a little positive reinforcement (see proselytizing above).

**7. Never let ‘em see you sweat.** Don’t get mad, upset, frustrated or annoyed. Treat as you would any other aspect of an employee’s performance.

Remember, this too shall pass.

Malcontents generally know they aren’t the most pleasant people in the world; they typically, however, feel somewhat justified in their actions, and certainly don’t always realize the extent of their behavior.

So, don’t get mad, just make them change.