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Is your colleague pure evil?

By Rhea Wessel

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(Credit: Alamy)

Obstruction, silent treatment and underhandedness. Is your colleague just evil or is there something more?

Picture these three work scenarios:

- You ask a colleague for documents needed to take the project to the next level. No response.
- You then ask your colleague a question at the copy machine. She pretends not to hear you.
- During a meeting, your colleague jokes sarcastically about sensitive matters in front of others to embarrass you.

Chances are you may be dealing with passive-aggressive behaviour, where a person tries to act appropriately on the surface, but has a negative and obstructive attitude behind that façade, explained Preston Ni, a communications professor and the author of *How to Successfully Handle Passive-Aggressive People*. He points to a Chinese proverb to sum it up nicely: "Behind the smile there's a hidden knife."

More than meets the eye

As with anything, the severity of the behaviour varies from individual to individual. "Most everybody engages in mild passive-aggressive behaviour from time to time," said Ni. "If I'm arguing with my friend and I don't call her back right away, I'm not clinically or pathologically passive aggressive. However, pathological passive-aggressives tend to use their behaviour as a regular tool for survival, relationships, and interaction with people."

At its most extreme, when passive aggressive behaviour becomes pathological — a *modus operandi* in private life or at work — Ni believes it springs from pain generated in childhood, when the person was cut off from his or her feelings or ridiculed or denied his feelings. "At some point, the person's humanity was denied," Ni said.

If those feelings are suppressed over the years, that anger eventually manifests itself in a way that isn't constructive, according to Ni. A survival instinct evolves. The passive aggressive person will fight back against oppression, whether it's real or simply perceived. In the workplace, obstructing a project through silent treatment or limited communication becomes the coping mechanism.

Communication gone dark

When a German consumer-goods executive negotiated a more interesting role for herself at work, she suddenly found several of her colleagues shifting back and forth between being cold and friendly.

"Generally, we're a really talkative department," said the 35 year old, who wished to remain unnamed because the situation at work is ongoing. But then there was weirdness.

She sent an email to them to ask if everything was OK. Her colleagues didn't respond. Not a peep.

Rather than telling her they thought the move was unfair or letting her know that accepting those responsibilities without additional pay or a better title would, in turn, make it harder for the rest of them to get compensated after a promotion, they simply gave her the cold shoulder.

"They didn't deny it, and they didn't confirm it," she said.

Befuddled by the mixed signals, the woman realised her own performance would decline if she didn't act. "My boss was expecting things from me, so I had to force my colleagues to talk to me."

She stayed professional and pursued task-related discussions, abandoning what was once a more personal and social work friendship. "I'm not really interested in rebuilding the personal relationship if somebody can switch on you like that," she said.

Turn the tables, play it positive

Rather than getting sucked into a battle with passive-aggressive colleagues, kill them with kindness.

"Being positive is the best way for me to not lose any more energy over this," the German executive said.

Ni outlines multiple strategies for dealing with passive-aggressives, including using soft skills, such as humour and small talk, to turn the situation around.

Among other things, Ni recommends using witty retorts, holding your ground, and staying away from passive-aggressives if all else fails. He also advises documenting behaviour for management and the HR department at your company, including any emails as evidence.

At its core, passive-aggressive behaviour is rooted in feeling powerless, said Ni. "You can encourage [the colleague] to have a voice, while at the

same time presenting the concerns backed up with facts and figures, not with judgment."

The power trip

The innate sense of powerlessness can make some people over-correct and turn to "hostage-taking". They use their clout or key position in an organisation to push their will, said author and leadership consultant John Townsend. Such a person might threaten to leave the company or go on a personal and subtle strike meant to block or obstruct — if others don't cooperate with his way of working.

Townsend, a clinical psychologist, leadership and development consultant, and author of *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life*, once worked with a US company stuck in a culture of fear. People felt they couldn't make mistakes without setting off one person in the organisation who was highly critical and judgmental — but also highly valued. Townsend said, "He was a shaming kind of guy, and people were walking on eggshells around him."

Townsend had coaching sessions with the man and gave him the feedback, which the man promptly denied. "He said, 'I'm not that way. I've got high standards. They just don't appreciate my standards and aren't willing to work hard. He described those complaining about him as 'a bunch of complainers'."

The man was so certain that the complaints were not true that he agreed to hear out his colleagues at a team meeting moderated by Townsend. The group sat at a conference table and told their stories. "By the fourth person, the man had tears in his eyes," Townsend recalled.

In further coaching sessions, he admitted that his father was a critical man and he had learned to be mean to others so the father couldn't get to him. The words of the team encouraged his self-reflection. "Within 30 days, he dropped the porcupine attitude and everything was fine," Townsend said.

A cry for help

In another case, where a manufacturer was losing customers, Townsend discovered an employee was causing bottlenecks in the flow of information, keeping sales data from being delivered on time for reports. The man always had lots of excuses, "My kid was sick, or I had bad traffic or someone else is not helping," he would say.

When he didn't receive a desired promotion, the man began to unconsciously sabotage the business. "He had come from a family where he couldn't be honest and tell the truth, or mom and dad would get upset. He learned to be this indirect person," said Townsend.

"The man was afraid of reprisal, afraid that people would look down on him or punish him in some way." Townsend actually scripted conversations and role-played them out with the employee.

"He needed to say: 'Hey, I'm having a hard time with this. I want to have a talk with you. I want to solve this problem'," Townsend said.

In the end, the magic medicine was building courage so he "could say when he's satisfied about something or irritated or overwhelmed," Townsend said. "When he became more direct, all of a sudden the traffic jam at work went away."

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