

# Passive-Aggressive Behavior in the Workplace



Some behaviors the PA employee may exhibit:

- Avoids responsibility for tasks.
- Does less when asked for more.
- Misses deadlines.
- Withholds information.
- Leaves notes and uses e-mail to avoid face-to-face communication.
- Arrives late to work and extends lunch breaks.
- Uses sick days during major team projects.
- Resists suggestions for change or improvement.
- “Forgets” and “misplaces” important documents.
- Denies being told about something.
- Embarrasses co-workers during meetings and presentations.
- Spreads gossip about the target of his or her anger.
- Justifies behavior with plausible explanations.
- Feigns cooperation and dedication, only to produce consistent failures or no results.
- Personalizes confrontations from authority, acting like a victim.

When you realize an employee is exhibiting passive-aggressive behavior, you must manage the situation. In our society we have been conditioned to avoid open confrontation. We try to be “nice” and this is what PA employees are counting on. They know that many managers rarely implement unpleasant consequences. But if you confront a PA employee, he or she generally will not fight back. The individual may clam up, give you the cold shoulder, tell you what you want to hear, or burst into tears and run away. Then, it is likely the PA employee will be less cooperative, stop communicating, confirm you are the enemy, and may even plan revenge.



Have you witnessed backstabbing, sabotage, and general nastiness in your workplace? Do you want to find out how to reduce, if not eliminate, such behavior from your office or plant? If so, read on.

Teamwork and communication are fundamental to a smooth-running workplace. Passive-aggressive (PA) behavior is a deliberate yet indirect method of expressing anger that negatively impacts organizational productivity. The PA worker feels underappreciated and unacknowledged for his or her work. The PA employee understands that the target of his or her anger, typically the manager, has enough power and authority to discipline or terminate the PA employee. Since most workplace settings do not tolerate adults who exhibit anger directly, the PA employee sabotages work situations within their control, such as deadlines, department morale, and meetings. The PA worker feels it is more important to express covert hostility than to maintain the appearance of professional competence. The worker uses intentional inefficiency to complete work in a purposefully unacceptable way.

Instead of waiting and then getting mad, let the PA know you won't be manipulated. Here are some tips for supervising the PA employee:

- Parcel out important tasks so there are several responsible people involved.
- Check in with the employee frequently for progress reports. Avoid getting embroiled in the PA person's attempt to make you wait. You are not on the PA employee's time schedule; he or she is on yours.
- Hold the PA worker accountable for a deadline and results.
- Pay attention to your perceptions and the mixed messages you may be receiving. Concentrate on what the individual does more than what he or she says.
- Ask questions to ensure you understand the employee's intentions.
- Confront the employee when he or she makes indirect digs by responding with phrases, like "Did you intend to be sarcastic? Sarcasm makes me think that there is something else you wish to discuss," "Was that a dig at me?" or "Maybe that was intended as a joke, but I found it hurtful and not funny."
- Respond assertively and follow your own perceptions. You can say something like, "Is this really your best effort in getting this assignment done? What can you do differently to get this assignment done by the deadline?" If the employee responds with a martyr-like response, take him or her up on the offer.
- Hold the PA employee accountable for results, not promises.


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These techniques may not work the first time, but may need to be repeated until the passive-aggressive individual stops. Less passive-aggressive behavior will lead to a better, more comfortable working environment for everyone.

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