

How to Solve an Attitude Problem

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INTRODUCTION

Harold Hook, the boy-wonder president of a couple of giant insurance companies, once opined that there are only three ways to make a basic, fundamental change in another person's attitude: deep psychotherapy, deep religious conversion, and brain surgery.

He may be right. The problem is, there isn't a manager around who's qualified to apply any of Hook's techniques. So put aside your concern about the attitude itself. Instead, concentrate on the specific behaviors that are sending your blood pressure into the stratosphere.

What's an "attitude"?

Just what is an attitude anyway? When you think about it, all an attitude is is a judgment that we make about a person based on what that individual says and does. It's the label we slap on another person's behavior when we don't like that behavior very much. But rather than using judgments and labels, the trick to solving attitude problems is to focus on what you know for sure — the specific things that the person did or said. You really never know for sure that somebody's got a bad attitude. What you do know for sure is that two customers complained about being treated rudely.

"But it isn't just what he said," you argue, "it's the way he said it. It's his tone of voice, and facial expression, and mannerisms and demeanor." OK, let's agree that the cause of the tactless behavior really is some deep-seated attitudinal deficiency. What are you going to do about it? Our core attitudes are pretty well fixed by the time we're three. If you've got an employee who's got a shabby attitude because he was toilet-trained wrong at the age of two — or twelve — there's not much you can do about that now.

To start, when you feel the need to confront someone who's in need of an attitude adjustment, *never* use the word "attitude." It's futile. Any person with a genuinely vile attitude has probably had that fact pointed out to him so many times that he's anesthetized. Raising the attitude issue one more time will undoubtedly be unproductive.

Instead, get specific. Is the person egotistical and credit-grabbing? Does she spend too much time socializing? Does he engage in pouting or sulking when he doesn't get his way? Or is she rude, surly and inconsiderate? All of these behaviors are different, but all of them are commonly slapped with the "attitude problem" label.

Trying to fix “an attitude problem” without drilling down to the specific problem or exact concern is like shoveling smoke — a hopeless endeavor. So start by narrowing the issue to the specific problem or concern that’s bugging you. Then write down the actual verbal and physical behaviors and actions that concern you — the evidence that the person’s is behaving in an unacceptable way. Be sure to record the non-verbals too — make note of rolling eyes, arms crossed tightly against chest, slow negative headshakes. Make believe you’re a movie camera recording what you see.

Keep track of how often the behaviors occur. No one is *always* rude to customers; nobody *never* helps other team members when a project deadline approaches. Get your times, dates and places exactly correct. This is a situation where keeping a log has a genuine payoff.

Once you’ve got an accurate and complete summary of a week or two of grating behaviors that have generated the “attitude problem” diagnosis, you’re almost ready for a discussion. But not quite. You first need to answer the question, “So what?”

So what if the person behaves this way? What difference does it make? Your goal here is to be fully prepared to explain not only *what* the person is doing that causes concern, but *why* the situation must immediately be changed.

What is the impact of the individual’s inappropriate behavior? What are the good business reasons why the organization expects employees to act in ways other than the way this guy’s acting right now? What effect does the negative attitude have on customers and co-workers? How is the person’s behavior at odds with the standards expressed in the company’s statement of vision and values? What are all of the adverse effects of this individual’s choice of behavior? Be ready to answer the “So what?” question in detail.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

With your written list of the unacceptable physical and verbal behaviors that you’ve observed, and the list of times and dates that they’ve occurred, and your summary of the good business reasons why an immediate correction must be made, you’re fully prepared and ready to talk. Having this written list will enormously boost your self-confidence in raising the issue. Find a private place to talk. Discuss the situation with the individual and explain that his behavior — remember: his *behavior*, not his *attitude* — is causing a problem.

Here's the way to get your discussion off to a good start. Say, "Jack, I've got a problem and I need your help." Saying "I" instead of "you" reduces defensiveness. Then talk about the specific things you've seen and heard — the things you know for sure — that concern you. Tell the person exactly why they concern you, and then ask for the person's help in solving the problem.

Don't expect to get any useful responses. What you'll probably get is a lot of denial, and maybe even an accusation that you're paranoid. That's OK. It took this guy some time to get to you, you can take some time to get to him. So wrap up this initial discussion swiftly by saying, "That's great, Jack. I'm glad you feel there's nothing to it. Let's get back together in a week or so and just make sure that the problem's solved." Frequently, just finding out that others are aware of one's bad-boy behavior is enough to get people to decide to change.

A week later, if there hasn't been a total turnaround, talk again. Point out additional examples of inappropriate behaviors that concern you, and once more request a change in his ways. Again, expect denial, and again, wrap up the meeting on a positive note.

In all of these conversations, your job is to listen as much as it is to talk. Is there any reasonable explanation for the way the person is acting? Is Sally even aware of what she's doing? It may be that the inappropriate attitude is simply a coping mechanism for a genuine life challenge that the person is trying her best to contend with. This is where an employee assistance program is indispensable.

RAISING THE STAKES

If you need a third session, you now get more serious. Point out bluntly that getting along with others and maintaining cooperative and business-like relationships are as much a part of the job as building widgets or processing insurance claims. People like this depend on the niceness of others to let them get away with their mischief. It's time to stop being nice.

Go over in detail the list of unacceptable behaviors you've observed. Describe exactly what the person did or said that was inappropriate. Review the time, the place, the reactions of others who were in the vicinity. Explain the good business reasons why change is mandatory — not preferred or requested, mind you, but obligatory and compulsory. Explain bluntly that the employee does not have a choice if he wants to keep his job. As the lawyers would put it, it is a *condition of employment*. And if you get a surly response of, "Well, that's not in my job description!" just grab his job description and write it in. Add a sentence that says, "The job incumbent will maintain a courteous, cheerful and cooperative demeanor at all times, in spite of any personal problems or unpleasant customer behavior."

Too often, managers do a good job of identifying all of the manifestations of the attitude and the good business reasons why a change must occur, but they fail to come right out and straightforwardly say, "Stop!" Don't hesitate to tell the person that she must stop behaving in unacceptable ways. You're the boss; you set the rules. Tell the individual exactly what behavior is required: courteous, cooperative, and helpful.

USE YOUR PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL FORM

Your performance appraisal form can be a powerful tool in bringing about an attitude change, particularly if it's not performance appraisal time. Hopefully your appraisal form asks managers to assess not only the results the person produces, but their behaviors and competencies as well. Find the most appropriate place on the form to describe the person's attitudinal failings and write the narrative describing in detail the unacceptable behaviors. And be sure to circle the form's lowest rating, whether it's Unsatisfactory, or Fails to Meet Expectations, or a 1.

In the course of your conversation, hand the person the appraisal form and say, "Margie, I know it's not time for your performance appraisal right now, but if it were, this is what it would say." Then hand the damning (but accurate) appraisal to the individual and let her read the narrative and the rating. Then say, "Margie, unless there is a dramatic and sustained change in your interactions with co-workers and customers, this is what you can expect when appraisal time rolls around. I wanted you to see this now so there won't be any surprises."

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS

In dealing with shabby attitudes, there are no guarantees. It may be that all your informal efforts fail and you have to move to formal disciplinary action and ultimately arrange a parting of the ways. But if you invariably demonstrate yourself the attitude you'd like to see in others, and have the courage to demand exemplary behavior as well as exemplary production, the odds go way up that that's what you'll get. And if termination does turn out to be the best answer, remember this: It's not the people you fire who make your life miserable. It's the people you don't.

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ABOUT GROTEAPPROACH, LTD.

GroteApproach, Ltd., is dedicated to delivering the technology, services and client care that transform organizations from best-effort climates into results-driven cultures. The GroteApproach web-based performance management system is the culmination of Dick Grote's mission to transform the way organizations manage and develop their most valuable resource - their people. It reflects best practices in strategy-based performance management as identified in Dick's 25 years of research and consulting with hundreds of sophisticated organizations throughout the world. Its combination of unrivaled expertise and superior technology make the GroteApproach system an ideal fit for organizations large and small.

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