

# HR Magazine

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## BEST SMALL & MEDIUM PLACES TO WORK

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## Attitude Adjustments

To deal with an employee's bad attitude, focus on his or her specific behaviors.

By Dick Grote

**H**arold S. Hook, the former CEO of American General insurance company (now AIG), once opined that there are only three ways to make a basic, fundamental change in a person's attitude: deep psychotherapy, deep religious conversion and brain surgery.

He may be right. The problem is, there aren't many managers around who are qualified to apply any of Hook's techniques.

If you are managing an employee with a "bad attitude," trying to fix it will do no good. The best way to deal with an attitudinally deficient employee is to put aside your concern about the attitude itself and concentrate instead on the specific behaviors that are

sending your blood pressure into the stratosphere.

### What's a Bad Attitude?

When you think about it, a bad attitude is just a judgment made by one person about another person based on what that individual says and does. It's a label slapped on another person's behavior when someone else doesn't like that behavior.

But rather than using judgments and labels, the trick to solving attitude problems is to focus on objective facts. For example, you really never know for sure what kind of attitude an employee took with a customer unless you were there. What you *do* know is that a customer complained about being treated rudely.

Even when you witness what you consider to be a bad attitude, you should always focus on the behavior—what this person said or did—not the attitude.

"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. A person's core attitudes are pretty well fixed by the time he's 3 years old. There's not much you can do about that now.

What you *can* do, to start, is when you feel the need to confront someone who is 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

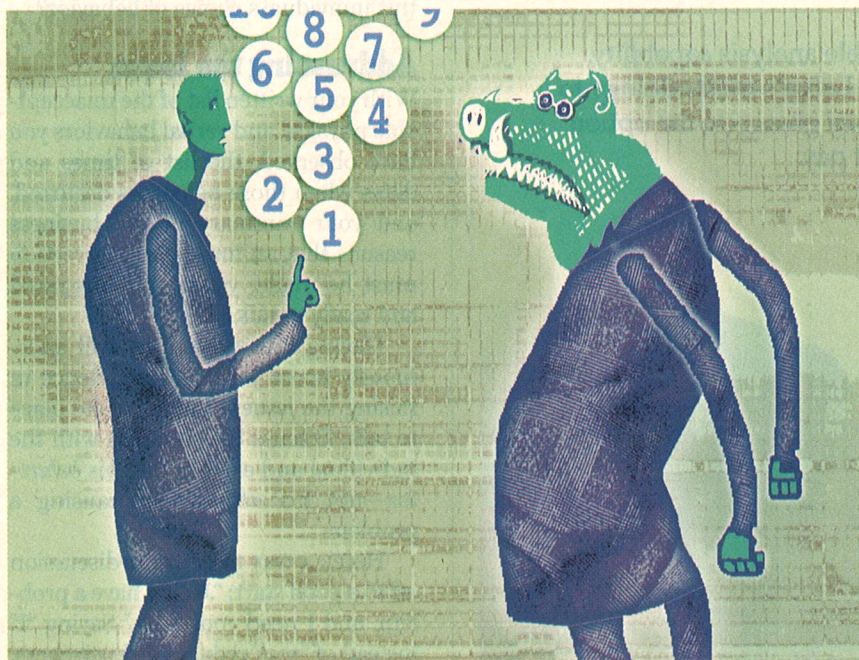


ILLUSTRATION BY VICTOR GAO



fact pointed out to him so many times that he's anesthetized to it. 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 pout or sulk when he doesn't get his way? Or is she rude, surly and inconsiderate? All these behaviors are different, but all of them are commonly slapped with the "attitude problem" label.

Start by narrowing the issue to the specific problem or concern that's bugging you. Then write down the actual behaviors and actions—the evidence that the person is behaving in an unacceptable way. Be sure to record the non-verbal behaviors along with the verbal—make note of rolling eyes, arms crossed tightly against chest, slow negative headshakes.

Keep track of how often the behaviors occur. No one is *always* rude to

customers; no one *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 have an accurate and complete summary of grating behaviors that have generated the "attitude problem" diagnosis, you're almost ready for a discussion. But not quite. First you 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. Answer the following questions:

- What is the impact of the individual's inappropriate behavior?
- What are the business reasons for why the organization expects employees to act in ways other than the way this employee is acting right now?
- How is the person's behavior at odds with the standards expressed in the company's statement of vision and values?
- What effect does the negative attitude have on customers and co-workers?
- What are all the adverse effects of this individual's choice of behavior?

## Addressing the Issue

With your written list of the unacceptable physical and verbal behaviors you have observed, the list of times and dates when those behaviors occurred, and your summary of the business reasons that 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*—not his *attitude*—is causing a problem.

Here's a way to get your discussion off to a good start: "Jack, I have a problem, and I need your help." Saying "I" instead of "you" reduces defensiveness.



Then talk about the specific things you have 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 will probably get is a lot of denial—and maybe even an accusation that you're overreacting. That's OK. 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 make sure that the problem is solved."

nesslike relationships are as much a part of the job as building widgets or processing insurance claims.

Go over in detail the list of unacceptable behaviors you've observed. Again, describe exactly what the person did or said that was inappropriate. Review the time, the place and the reactions of others who were in the vicinity. Explain the business reasons why change is mandatory—not preferred or

detail the unacceptable behaviors. Be sure to circle the form's lowest rating, whether it's "unsatisfactory" or "fails to meet expectations" or a "1" rating.

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.

Continue by saying, "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 of 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 would like to see in others, and have the courage to demand exemplary behavior as well as exemplary production, the odds go way up that you will get just that.

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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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 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 busi-

nesslike relationships are as much a part of the job as building widgets or processing insurance claims.

Too often, managers do a good job of identifying all 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 kind of 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 her behaviors and competencies as well. Find the most appropriate place on the form to write about the person's attitudinal failings and describe in





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