Passive aggressive behaviors
Repressed anger hidden behind a pleasant facade.

Opening scenario

Pamela has been at her current position for seven years. She brags that she has seen and done it all. She doesn't like meetings about schedules or upcoming events because they are a waste of time. She knows what she has to do and needs no instruction or overseeing. She resents when others ask for her help (“they should know how to do their own work!”). When her boss requests updates on her project, she willingly agrees and begins to create her report. However, when it is time to present her report, her excuses vary ... from her heavy workload to how others have distracted her and that she thought she had more time.

Background

In today’s global environment, teams have become one of the primary ways to accomplish the diversity of work required to remain competitive. Along with this diversity comes change — in processes, procedures, systems, work environments, work hours, work locations, team members, team leads, project managers, etc. Certain personality types adapt quite easily and quickly to change; others need time to mentally process all the aspects of the change. Some people want an overview of the changes; others need specific details and the time to discuss concerns and the implications of the change. All this can bring about emotional turmoil in one or several team members. Emotions are contagious — even if it affects only one person, the rest of your team can also be affected.

You may not be aware of the emotional upset by others, or you may discount the far-reaching effects the change will have. Initially any individual offending behavior is attributed to personal issues, ‘having a bad day’ or other excuses. Eventually you realize that this person is causing a slow upheaval in morale, productivity, relationships and performance. At this point, you are dealing with a passive aggressive personality.

Passive aggressive (PA) individuals don’t feel comfortable raising their concerns about issues or decisions they don’t agree with. Their subsequent actions are deliberate. To feel they are still in control, they manipulate others without being obvious or direct about it. PA consists of three common behaviors:

1. They choose to do work of little importance before finishing tasks that are critical. This affects others in the team, especially when their work is part of the overall project. If asked to complete specific tasks, they can sulk, argue or complain about their heavy workload.

2. They become defensive when the boss suggests more efficient ways to work as they believe their work quality far surpasses others. They can conveniently ‘forget’ suggested methods and other obligations, reverting to the processes they have used in the past.
3. They will justify their behaviors by unfairly criticizing those in authority. These verbal assaults usually occur behind the person’s back. Their message is “no one controls me!”

These behaviors begin with the appearance of contributing to the team, agreeing with the procedures and work assignments. This is only temporary – the passive portion of their behaviors. Intentional inefficiencies soon can be discerned, including with their lack of relevant communication. Causing another to readjust their schedule because of the PA’s actions (PA submits a report shortly before it is due, without following proper procedures and affects another’s time schedule) would be an example of this level. They can also resist what others perceive as ‘reasonable requests’. The most severe reaction is the hidden yet conscious revenge where the PA may actually harm themselves to derail the project or to get back at someone. This could be intentionally sabotaging a report so the manager looks bad or some other altercation. It can backfire when everyone knows who did the work and the substandard performance is recorded in the employee’s file.

Causes

PA behaviors are those that, in some way, convey negative feelings to the person triggering those feelings. Those feelings are based on the PA’s need for idea acceptance or self-worth that does not occur. They may feel if they speak up, they will lose the respect of others. Instead of vocalizing their displeasure, the connection between what a PA person actually does and what they say they will do is not congruent. They demonstrate their genuine feelings through their actions, not their words.

Even the most reasonable and professional person can occasionally exhibit some of the above behaviors. Their reactions can be attributed to an inordinate amount of stress (both personal and professional), frustration (with themselves, the organization or others) or preoccupation (worry, anxiety, disappointment). Because the mind can only concentrate on one thought at a time, sudden changes affect what is uppermost on a person’s mind. The **flight/fight** response thwarts the ability to see the bigger picture. This in turn affects a person’s thinking, feeling and emotional reactions.

Understanding the passive behaviors

Passive behaviors are fear-of-consequences based. It is part of the flight (passive) survival reaction. Spreading rumors, “I did not mean anything by it” or saying their actions were misinterpreted are common behaviors of the passive portion. Their actions can be ambiguous and easily misconstrued; words or behaviors in one context can be acceptable and in another can be a passive form of hostility. PA individuals use these behaviors to resist difficult situations they cannot openly challenge; it might be because they may get punished in some manner, or their words will come back to haunt them. They harm others by withholding some action (not providing information) or by spreading rumors (attacking something valued by the other person).

Direct individuals are usually not passive-aggressive. PA individuals are more introverted than extroverted, more people-oriented than task oriented. They feel uncomfortable with confrontations. They do
not want to cause a scene because they fear the other person will react aggressively. They tend to look away from others, not wanting to meet their gaze.

**Understanding aggressive arena**

Aggressive behaviors, voiced negative views without regard for others, are part of the fight (retaliation) reaction. PA’s need a way to release their intense anger or other negative emotions, which are based in their feeling unappreciated, undervalued and misunderstood. The PA individual directs their aggravation towards the boss or an authority figure, although they may not speak directly to the offending person. Their indirect actions can appear as purposefully working slowly, giving dirty looks, sulking, spreading rumors, unprepared and showing up late for meetings, delaying work, and not returning phone calls or emails.

Retaliations can include interrupting, ignoring or refusing to speak to a particular person. Any conversations that do occur can contain messages that are perceived to be hurtful, bullying or uncivil. PA individuals will seek out others that share their views and those conversations can fuel additional adverse behaviors, creating a ‘collective delusion’ of the situation. Supporting one another’s actions, these behaviors can damage work relationships, corporate culture and bottom line results.

**Challenges in addressing PA behaviors**

Perceptions of the accepted forms of aggression varies from company to company, department to department, manager to manager, person to person. The PA individual can respond with “I was only kidding!” and when asked not to continue those behaviors, can ridicule the individual making the request. Situations compound when the PA individual denies their own anger. They believe expressing this anger will make the situation worse. As a result, this shuts down any opportunities for open and emotionally honest conversations.

Temporary compliance offers another challenge. The PA individual will initially agree with the request, yet will not act upon it within an appropriate length of time. This is the most common form of PA behaviors. “I’ll do it next” or “I’m getting to it” is their method of putting off completing the requested task. They want to hurt others, as they have been hurt.

Uncertain of the reaction of others, some PA’s believe that by mentioning their own wants or needs they will be seen as selfish, especially if their needs are contrary to the group. As a result, they choose less confrontational methods to express their needs. When asked, the PA individual may not initially ‘own up’ to their true feelings; it takes a high degree of trust and reassurances to get them to consider being forthright.

**Resolutions and management**

Taking appropriate action to minimize the effects of these behaviors requires patience, persistence and a keen awareness of one’s own emotional roller-coaster rides. Any actions should be directed towards changing deep-seated attitudes, not simply suppressing unproductive behaviors or changing behaviors at ‘surface’ level.
The overall goal is to change the behaviors of the PA individual from indirect defensiveness to respectfully address bothersome issues.

Discussing these behaviors with the PA individual can result in frustration and a sense of going around in circles. The PA person will have excuses (“I ran out of time”, “I didn’t get the information I needed”, “You said another task had a higher priority”, “I was late because <insert any of a number of excuses> or anything similar). These are targeting one specific instance and this does not have a consistent solution. You need to address the behaviors *one level up* – address the *pattern* of their behaviors, not their specific instances.

Addressing these behavioral patterns can be accomplished by careful pre-thought, capturing specific instances and key points to reflect their unacceptable behavior. You can also anticipate their response and prepare a firm reply that will keep your discussion on track. Below are some steps you can take to mitigate the potential conflict and promote healthy dialogue:

1. Begin with a firm request to meet with the individual. Remember their PA behaviors emerge when ‘authority speaks’. They probably know the reason for the meeting; your job is to make it as comfortable and non-threatening as you can so they do not revert to their PA behaviors.
2. Keep your voice tone non-defensive yet firm. Using words such as “I understand”, “Let’s stay on track”, “Can you elaborate?” and “Why do you say that?” are good phrases to keep them talking. Convey to them through your eye contact and body language that they have your full attention.
3. Ask “How do you know?” when they accuse others of untoward motives. Politely insist on seeing ‘proof’; if they cannot produce any, you should not continue that conversation thread, as it will be based on speculation. Others’ bad behavior does not justify their bad behavior.
4. Deal with their responses on an emotional level, specifically their fear or anger. They may not come right out and tell you what the source of their PA behavior is. Asking them “Why does it matter to you?” or “What’s the importance of …?” will reveal their emotions. Remember to keep a non-defensive and non-judgmental tone of voice.
5. Their perspectives and emotions are at the core of their behaviors. PA’s need a safe, non-threatening environment to feel comfortable enough to share some very private feelings. Your attentive and reflective listening skills will be put to the test. Using the phrases in #2, 3 and 4 and paraphrasing their views (without a hint of judgment in your voice) is paramount to understanding their perception of the situations. Your words should not contract your actions.
6. Remember that emotions are contagious. Your agitation will provoke their PA behaviors, and the situation will not be remedied. Your composed demeanor will provide a sense of calmness and security, possibly allowing them to share more of their reasoning and rationale. It is important that
you not convey any sense of judgment on their actions. You can discuss how their behaviors affect you, how they affect the team and how they affect the project.

7. **Address specific patterns of behavior**, not specific instances of that pattern. Point out the impact their actions have on the team and on themselves. Let them know the consequences of their actions – how it will affect them. To do this, you need to know their values – if they do not value cooperation, telling them that others won’t work with them will not deter their actions.

8. Take special note of their reactions to your statements. Did they flinch, lower their gaze, shift in their seat, shake their head? They are ‘telling’ you what they are feeling – it is up to you to notice and acknowledge it. “I see you are ……., are you uncomfortable?”, “You now seem to be irritated/flustered/annoyed … can you tell me why?” are appropriate statements.

Throughout this process, you should be able to identify those thoughts that are preventing a meaningful conversation. Using your attentive listening skills you can address those thoughts with questions. This continues to demonstrate both concern for them as a person, and progress towards a satisfactory resolution. The gap between what the PA person thinks (their ‘reality’) and how others see the situation should eventually become apparent. It is those specific areas that can be focused on and addressed. Care must be taken with the words you use. Words can be misconstrued and misinterpreted. They can provoke anger, irritation, frustration, denial and emotional outbursts. They can also convey optimism, acceptance compassion and empathy.

*Remember Pamela in the opening scenario? As her manager, you need to address several specific instances:*

1. **Her tenure, and the value of her experience to the team.** “Pamela, you are a tremendous asset to the team – your knowledge of the <client, processes, project> allows us to <complete the task more quickly, offer additional suggestions, etc.>

2. **Her consistency in ignoring standard processes, and the effect it has on other team members (from both a leadership and a team member perspective).** “When you <don’t provide the information timely, are late for regular meetings, get upset when you are asked to do something you don’t want to do, etc.>, it lowers the morale of the entire team and leaves us scrambling.”

3. **Is indeed her workload too heavy?** To remove any of her tasks may aggravate the situation. Be sure you personally have heard her make these remarks; otherwise, she may take her aggression out on the team members.
4. **The change she is resisting ... what it is, how she perceives it will affect her, and her response.** “Pamela, it sounds like <the change> has you concerned ... tell me why.”

It is this last item that is probably the crux of the situation. However it may be difficult for the other person to admit they are unable or afraid to adapt to the change.

**Summary**

This article has focused on general passive aggressive individuals. There is a clear distinction between a PA person who uses these behaviors as a way of life and one who occasionally succumbs to stress and frustration. These behaviors are a reflection of the anxiety level the other person is experiencing. To have any chance of managing these behaviors, you need to present both compassion and a firm objective case.

Taking appropriate and quick action is necessary to preserve your corporate culture, along with the morale and productivity of your team members. Brace yourself for emotional outbursts and withdrawals; either or both may happen. Maintaining your own composure is the critical element in this discussion.

**Footnotes**

The complete list of passive-aggressive levels are: 1 – temporary compliance, 2 – intentional inefficiency, 3 – letting a problem escalate, 4 – hidden but conscious revenge, and 5 – self-deprecation. I have condensed the list to expand on managing the behaviors.

**Flight/fight:** the primal urge to perceived danger, directly related to survival. Flight includes actual moving away or withdrawal and is fear based. Fight is aggression or retaliation and is based in anger.

**References**


**About Dr. Shari Frisinger (Doctorate in Executive Leadership) ....**

A resourceful, informative and entertaining speaker and presenter, Dr. Shari links leader communication styles in stress and changing environments with neuro-science and emotional intelligence. This directly relates to a leader’s ability to manage rapid change. Her expertise lies in leadership communications, conflict resolution and influencing behaviors, resulting in stronger and more cohesive teams, a higher level of safety and service, enhanced creativity and innovation, and a positive impact on the company’s bottom line.

Executives utilizing Dr. Shari’s RADAR Leadership programs realize increased morale, productivity, retention and loyalty, which equates to a stronger bottom line. Her coaching, consulting and training clients include Chevron, Pfizer, Amway, Texas Instruments, BNYMellon, FirstEnergy and Cessna. She has also had several articles published in the areas of leadership and emotional intelligence, including “Emotionally Enabled” in Flight Safety Foundation’s AeroSafety World magazine.

*When you instinctively react, the situation manages you. Consciously respond and you are in control™.*