

DEAR DR. MAZIE,

I work in an environment where the cubicles are very close together. Overall, we have a good group of folks, but there is one person who is really negative and spouts off throughout the day in a pretty loud voice. It's been going on for over a year and he is driving the rest of us crazy. We've complained to our supervisor, but nothing has changed. Can you help us?

Joachim in Albuquerque



The reality is, just one bad attitude can affect an entire organization. Once negativity spreads, it can cost your company plenty in terms of lower morale, lost opportunities and decreased productivity.

The most important step you can take is to stop any negativity from spreading immediately. Most of us wait for a manager to deal with these kinds of issues, but coworkers have a responsibility as well. Unfortunately, we're usually hesitant to say something out of timidity or a fear of retaliation. Or we underestimate the impact we can have with a coworker. But you might be surprised at the impact and long-term benefits of confronting a coworker with something direct like, "You know Jack, I'm really tired of all your negative remarks. Would you please just keep them to yourself?" Now, you may have to confront them more than once, but I can pretty much guarantee that if you, and even better, if others would also say something to Jack, Jack will stop.

Regardless of where we work, there will always be at least one complainer, pessimist or gossip. And sometimes all these attributes are rolled into one person. I recall taking a training class where a "Jack" started off in the first 15 minutes of class with snide remarks, questions and distractions. Trying to be polite, the instructor attempted laughing it off, ignoring him and even turned one of his remarks into a joke. Finally, so disgusted with him, the instructor called an early break and asked the class coordinator, who worked with Jack, what was going on with him. She told the instructor that Jack acted like this all day, every day and had for years. Jack's manager was aware of his behavior but never did anything about it. His coworkers had only griped to each other, and other instructors had simply put up with him. But this particular instructor couldn't do that.

As class resumed, the instructor began trying to shape Jack's behavior. After several more remarks, the instructor said, "Jack, please don't interrupt," followed by, "Jack, I need to finish this section before I take comments." The instructor continued with,

"Jack, you're not being very polite to your fellow students," and finally, "Jack, I'm going to give the class another break, and you and I are going out into the hall to visit."

In the hall, the instructor told Jack that he knew that the comments, snide remarks and distractions were his usual way of interacting in groups, but that this behavior wasn't going to be tolerated. Jack was told he was going to sit quietly through class, pay attention and participate in an acceptable way like everyone else, closing with, "Jack, you need to know that I can throw you out of this class, which would be very embarrassing to you. And I will do it. Do you really want to go there?"

Jack was obviously a passive-aggressive bully that controlled situations because no one ever challenged or corrected him. It took the instructor's courage and determination to not let Jack ruin the learning environment for everyone else. Jack decided to listen to the instructor's warning. He sat quietly through the remainder of the class. Apparently, he learned a powerful lesson, as did his coworker. It's just a shame that his manager and coworkers hadn't dealt with him years ago.

It only takes one negative individual to impact an entire office. Combating a coworker's negativity takes a bit of courage, but if you are willing to take the first step, you can help prevent it from spreading and put an end to unacceptable behavior.

A nationally recognized speaker, workshop leader and trainer, Dr. Mazie Leftwich, Psy.D has a clinical background in applied psychology with expertise in organizational and personal development. She is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and team excellence programs.

