



insights

EMPOWERING LEADERS TO EXCEL

Managing Negative Naysayers on Your Team

The Leadership Challenge

“Being a committee or work group leader is challenging under the best circumstances, but, occasionally, the job becomes even more difficult when a team member is constantly second-guessing or criticizing. This will not only create enormous frustration in the life of the leader and in that of other group members, but can also seriously disrupt the team’s ability to work.”

That is why it’s imperative that a leader deal with this type of behavior in a well-thought-out and confident manner. Volunteer leadership assignments don’t come with a PhD in psychiatry, so a leader should never try to psychoanalyze a team member’s conduct. Instead, he or she should address the matter by describing the disruptive behavior, explaining its impact on the team, and defining the change that is required.

When a team member takes contradictory positions without being able to substantiate his or her point of view; constantly criticizes decisions made by the board of directors; disagrees with the goals defined in the organization’s strategic plan; finds fault with the performance of staff members; and/or attacks proposals put forth by other team members, he or she is a “distracter” whose behavior must be addressed.

Let’s examine the steps a leader can take to remedy this type of situation, as well as how best to avoid it from occurring in the first place.

First – The best prevention plan is for the leader to discuss the issue of individual behavior when the team first meets. It’s important to describe the behaviors that contribute to a team’s success, such as:

- Respecting the opinions of other team members
- Requesting clarification of ideas when appropriate
- Disagreeing with an idea, but never criticizing the person proposing the idea
- Understanding that the team must work within the parameters established by the board of directors
- Presenting the rationale for an idea that is being proposed
- Responding to inquiries about a proposed idea in a courteous and cooperative manner.

After delineating the types of positive conduct, the leader should get a commitment from each team member that he or she is comfortable working within these guidelines.

Second – Human nature being what it is, there will be times when a team member exhibits behavior that distracts the team from its mission. Since the leader has already addressed the issue of desired behavior at the first meeting, he or she can now politely refer back to the team’s commitment to behave in a fashion that contributes to its success. In most cases, this will be enough to correct the problem. However, there will be times when a team member will be unwilling to adjust his or her behavior to adhere to the guidelines initially outlined. In such cases, the leader needs to take the matter to the next step.

Third – This discussion needs to be face-to-face, never via email or on the phone. The meeting should be in a neutral setting, such as a restaurant or a conference room at the association headquarters. The leader should begin the meeting by describing the negative behavior that the team member is displaying and its impact on the team. It's important to refer to specific behavior rather than using adjectives to describe the member's conduct.

If a member is constantly being critical of other members when they present new ideas at a meeting, the leader should never say, *"Mike, lately at our team meetings, you have insulted people who presented ideas that you didn't agree with, and, in some cases when they tried to defend themselves, you became somewhat belligerent."*

This type of statement is more critical of the person's character than it is of the person's behavior, because the leader is saying that the team member is "insulting" and "belligerent."

The leader should focus on this member's behavior rather than on his characteristics, by saying something such as: *"Mike, during the last couple of meetings, there have been several occasions where you have responded to a proposal by criticizing the person who presented the idea rather than addressing the merits of the idea. This creates a tension that limits the quality of the dialogue among group members."*

If the member asks for clarification, the leader should provide specific examples.

In the case where a team member continuously expresses negative views, the leader could use the same strategy by saying something along the lines of:

"Michelle, during the last few meetings, you have expressed your disagreement with the work that the board of directors has assigned to our team. This generates a conversation regarding the validity of the assignment, which distracts the team from its work. The board of directors has the authority to decide what our team should work on, so there is no point discussing whether or not our task has merit."

Again, the leader should provide examples of this behavior if the member requests.

In these two examples, the leader has made the member aware of the distracting behavior. Since people are sometimes unaware of the manner in which they are behaving, simply having it gently pointed out in this type of face-to-face discussion with the leader may be enough to elicit a change.

However, there will be times when the leader will have to go to the next step.

Fourth – When a team member is apprised of his or her behavior and then disagrees with the leader as to its impact, the leader must have the skill and confidence to continue the conversation until he or she gets the individual to commit to a behavioral change.

In order for this phase of the meeting to be effective, the leader must maintain control of the conversation. If the team member tries to challenge the leader's assessment that the behavior distracts the team from its work, the leader must avoid debating this issue. In the example of the negative person who was critical of the task assigned by the board of directors, it is within the leader's purview to decide that discussing the merits of the board's decision is not something that should take place during a team meeting.

If necessary, the leader must assert his or her authority by saying that comments critical of the board do not contribute to the team's productivity, and, therefore, the leader is requesting that the member refrain from this type of comment at future meetings.

The leader should always be prepared to resolve this type of discussion by saying something such as, *"Michelle, I understand that you feel as if your comments are acceptable; however, as the team's leader, I think it causes the team to waste time discussing matters over which it has no control, and creates conflict between you and other team members."*

Saying something like, “Michelle, you may not be aware of this, but most of what you say at our meetings has a very negative connotation” could be interpreted as an insult.

It is always best to use statements that describe the individual’s past behavior. For example, a leader can address a negative naysayer in the following way:

“Michelle, I have noticed that in our recent meetings you have made some comments that express a frustration regarding something that our team has no control over. In the last meeting, you interrupted a discussion that our team was having by stating that our association’s by-laws are antiquated, as are most of the policies that guide our association. You also mentioned that a couple of members of the staff lack the technological skills necessary to communicate effectively with our members. In both instances, your comments were followed by a discussion among team members regarding the adequacy of the by-laws and the qualification of our staff members.

Neither of these topics had anything to do with the task on which our team needed to focus. So, I need to ask you in future meetings to refrain from making comments other than those that contribute to the work of the team. This isn’t to suggest that you can’t express your opinions in an open and honest manner, but please limit them to the topic at hand in order for our team to work as efficiently and as effectively as possible.”

Every leader must have the confidence to address distracting behavior, and, if need be, to invite a member to remove himself or herself from the team if he or she cannot comply with the guidelines agreed to in the first meeting.

Volunteers who serve on committees, task forces and work groups look to the group leader to establish and maintain an environment in which people can come together and work without being distracted by the behavior of one or more members. Effectively addressing naysayers goes a long way towards meeting these expectations.



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