



FINDING YOUR SERENITY: Successful Approaches for Dealing with Problem Employees

Lewis G. Bender, Ph.D.
Michigan Public Service Institute Facilitator and Instructor
Management Consultant and Trainer
www.lewbender.com

Jack was having a great Sunday afternoon. It was at the end of a great four-day weekend. He had spent a lot of time with his wife and kids, and now he and his daughter were fishing for perch. Then it suddenly and unexpectedly happened. Paul Crumbly (PC-a.k.a. problem child) popped into Jack's head. PC was a problematic member of the team that Jack led. "Oh crap, I have to deal with Paul tomorrow. I wonder what he will do this time?" For much of the rest of the afternoon, PC lived rent-free in Jack's head. The thoughts of the PC were decidedly negative and impacted the rest of Jack's day.

There are numerous subtle and not-so-subtle impacts that toxic, problematic employees have on their leaders as well as their fellow team members. In forty-four years of dealing with and studying the behaviors and impacts of people like PC, I have come to believe that their most significant negative impact is in *your head*. In some of the most insidious ways, PCs often destroy the sense of joy, accomplishment, and hope of the people around them. They destroy your serenity.

Do not despair! There is hope. It is also apparent, based on all these years of research, that the vast majority of problem employee behaviors are predictable. Also, there are specific things that you can do to at least mitigate and maybe even resolve the problem of the PC behaviors and their impacts on you and your team.

In this brief article, I will outline the top four predictable PC behaviors (there are many more) and offer some suggestions for how to address each behavior. At the conclusion, there will be some overall suggestions for addressing the cancerous behaviors that infect many teams.

Top Four Predictable Problem Employee Behaviors and Their Impacts

- 1. PCs Gossip.** The old saying is, "Mold hates sunshine; gossipers hate honesty and directness." PCs always work in the shadows. They rarely address issues in a straight-up honest and direct manner. They argue that if they are honest with the boss, he or she will get back at them in the future. There isn't a decision that you can make that can't or won't be criticized by PCs behind your back. Gossip is a primary weapon for most PCs. They use it to accomplish their primary goal. That is to gain power by dividing people and ultimately "conquering" the authority and influence of the team leader. Indeed, if you are a new team leader that members of the team like, the PC typically will slowly but surely work to undermine the sense of trust and fairness that people have in you. (The PC will say.) "Gee, I don't know what has happened with Jack. He used to be a good guy. However, over this past week, he has been mean. Did you see how Jack

treated Joe?” Seeds get planted, and the PC continues to sow dissent and division behind your back.

Suggestion: Clearly, you will never stop gossip in a team. However, a heavy dose of honesty and directness can severely blunt the negative impacts of gossip. Call the foul. Stop thinking that you need absolute proof to call a person on gossiping. Ask the question: “PC, I heard that you said that I was mean to Joe. Is that true?” Then bite your lip until it bleeds and say nothing. Of course, PC will deny it. When he does, express your joy that it didn’t happen. Do this every time, and it will typically cause PC to suspect his gossip buddies are not protecting him and he will think twice about gossiping in the future. Oh, yes, he will ask:” Who told you?” Don’t divulge who told you. Just say: “It is gossip, and I don’t want to spread it, I just want to address the rumor and be sure we are on the same page.”

2. **PCs always play a zero-sum/win-lose game.** This is classic PC behavior. In fact, in all these years, I have never met a PC that doesn’t play this game. The zero-sum game is directly opposite of the “non-constant” sum-positive-*we can make it better for everyone game* that most supervisors wish to play. When I ask most supervisors why they took the promotion to leadership, the most consistent response is: “I thought I could make it better.” This compares to the typical orientation of the PC, which is self-interest. It’s about **ME**. What this translates to is that most supervisors often have trouble understanding why PCs behave as they do. Supervisors will often say: “PC spends more time avoiding doing the work than it would take to get the job done!” The misunderstanding here is that it is about the work. It isn’t. **It is all about power.** “I can show you that you don’t control me.” Everybody on the team will see how the PC can undermine your authority. Most PCs resent fairly-based authority because it threatens their power. So, they play all kinds of stall tactics and games to show that you don’t control them. It is important to note that this is a way of thinking. The bottle is always half empty. It is very rare that any supervisor will get a PC to come around to a non-constant sum-positive way of thinking. One serious impact of this is that the zero-sum game becomes a “head-game. If Jack, our supervisor, doesn’t understand the game he is in with PC, it will inevitably undermine his serenity.

Suggestion: The key here is to understand what game is being played. The PC is getting you to play his or her game. In your experience, how often have you ever seen a true PC come around to becoming a consistently positive person? Stop trying to change who the PC is. Stop playing in a reactive mode. Get the PC to play your game. You become proactive. Make them play reactively. Rather, when you assign a job or task, always be specific about the tasks and the time frames you expect. In some instances, you may need to ask the PC to repeat back the tasks and time frames. You know how they are going to react to most directives and jobs. Anticipate the behavior and get ahead of it. I know this is an aggravation because increasing accountability in those who avoid accountability is a time-consuming pain. You have a choice. You can choose to always react to them or force them to react to you.

3. **PCs are always victims. It is a significant recruitment tool.** Have you ever met a PC that wasn’t a victim? Neither have I. Being a victim is another relatively important tool in the PC toolbox. Please note, there are true victims in this world. And they should be cared for and supported in their challenges. That is not what we are talking about here. Instead, PCs cloak themselves in victim-like narratives. Bottom line: **You are mean, unfair, and abusive. Moreover, we are the victims of your reign of terror and abuse.** This narrative is often the central message-delivered through the gossip that PCs send to other members of the team. The PC is well served by this message, and inevitably some (maybe many) of the members of the team will buy in. Think about the

advantages of being a victim:

- The PC is never to blame and has Teflon all over him because the boss is mean and abusive.
- Victims are never held accountable, and they are not responsible when something goes wrong. Someone else is always to blame.
- People sympathize with the PC, and he or she may even get sympathy from the boss's boss.
- The PC thinks he or she should be protected and not be required to do a fair share-let alone more work.

Sometimes, PCs will wear discipline by the team leader like a badge. Indeed, it can quickly become a recruitment tool with others in the team. **“Just another example of how unfair Jack is. He wrote me up for being five minutes late. You never see him writing up his favorite-special people. Go ahead and trust him. You get on his wrong side, and you’re screwed.”** It doesn’t matter that Jack is very fair in tasking and discipline. PC avoids work, doesn’t engage in self-initiated tasks, and is one of the least productive members of the team. None of that is important. It is ***the narrative*** that matters and facts are not particularly relevant to the narrative. Frequently I have heard PCs talk about alleged abuse that happened ten years ago and involved a different supervisor and leadership team. The message is that no supervisor can be trusted or believed. So the PC reinforces that narrative every chance he or she gets.

Suggestion: Change the expectations. This change takes some time and effort. Engage the team in a series of ongoing discussions focusing on and reinforcing the following questions:

- What should members of the team expect of the team leader?
- What should the team leader expect of each member of the team?
- What should everyone expect of everyone else?
- What should the team leader and team members do if someone doesn’t follow these expectations?
- What should we do differently to be more effective as a team?

Yes, whether you use a facilitator or not, this will take some time. There are several ways to get members of the team to identify and discuss their expectations. One is to divide the team randomly, give each group a flip chart, and have them bullet point their responses to the questions. Then discuss (don’t just list) things when you bring the flip charts together. The team leader should also be answering the questions. E-mail a copy of the composite discussion to everyone in the team. Regularly, follow up by asking how am I doing on the expectations? How are we doing?

The key here is that these are no longer just the team leader’s expectations. They are the shared expectations of everyone on the team. Clarifying expectations makes it harder, but not impossible, for the PC to call the expectations unfair.

4. PCs question everything and never take ownership of anything.

Talk about losing your serenity! When PC questions, nit-picks and constantly undermines every one of Jack’s decisions, it drives Jack up a wall. It doesn’t matter how much Jack explains his reasoning, or, how solid the decision or task assignment is. It will never be fair enough, smart

enough, or good enough for PC. This approach of nit-picking and questioning takes on many forms from questioning task assignments in front of the team, examining each step of a process that PC has done numerous times before, to gossiping behind Jack's back about the ignorance or unfairness of a decision.

In the final analysis, this approach can serve the PC in several significant ways:

- It undermines the team leader's authority in the minds of many members of the team.
- It sometimes makes the PC look smarter than the boss.
- It is a great vehicle for criticizing without ownership. "I was just asking a question."
- It may cause Jack to stop giving PC many jobs because Jack doesn't want to deal with PCs crap.

In PCs world of zero-sum games, this nit-picking, questioning approach puts him in a position of authority without responsibility or ownership. PC rarely provides answers or accountable strategies for dealing with jobs or issues. However, PC is excellent at identifying seeming weaknesses or problems with Jack's decisions.

Suggestion: Turn the table. Stop being the Shell answer-man. Start by asking PC what he would do or how he would do it. Ask the same questions that he would ask you. By the way, if he comes up with good answers that are acceptable to you -go with it. Indeed, praise him for his ideas.

However, when he can't answer your questions regarding issues and problems that may arise than go with your initial thoughts. "PC unless I hear something better, we need to do it this way."

A strong team leader should always be open to ideas and suggestions-even from PC. I call it: "Lead by Question." When members of the team are asked their views before making a decision, it increases their ownership and increases the knowledge base of the team leader.

If you wish to show respect for members of the team, ask them what they think and seek out their views. Team leaders who frequently seek out the opinions of members of their team have fewer problems with problem employees.

Closing Thoughts and Ideas

Again, this brief article just touches the surface of PC behaviors and ways to address them. Many others come to mind including constant negativity, bullying, making things personal, doing minimal levels of work, doing end arounds to the higher-ups, etc. Time and space do not permit a full discussion of these and other toxic behaviors. However, there are some other things that you and the leadership team can do to address these concerns:

- **Get the supervisory team on the same page.** You all probably know who your problem employees are and how they behave. They are predictable. So why aren't you helping the person(s) who is directly supervising the PC? What is the leadership team's shared strategy? How big is the gap between supervisor "I want to be your friend" and supervisor "hard nose?" Is there consistency with how tasks are assigned and PCs are dealt with? Consistency should be an ongoing discussion.
- **Agree on team decision making ground rules-Use "Ask and Discuss."** The rules of ask and discuss are very straightforward. As a team leader, you make the following deal with your team.

- Whenever I have to make a non-urgent significant decision I will ask for your views;
- Then I will make the decision and give you the reasons;
- As long as the decision is legal, ethical, moral, and safe (you can think it is a dumb decision), you owe me and the team 100% follow through-no games.
- The overall impact of this approach is very positive for members of the team and highly negative for problem employees. When members of the team feel respected and loyal to the team leader, the impact of the PC diminishes rapidly.
- **Regain your Serenity. It's Not About You.** When PC pops into your brain on Sunday afternoon, ask yourself a couple of questions: Did he or she do this with other supervisors? He or she inevitably did. Is this really about me or is he or she playing the predictable game? Your joy and serenity are too valuable to be stolen from you by a toxic person. The more you can understand PCs behavior and objectify it and not internalize it, the more effective you will be as a leader to your entire team.