

# How to Deal With a Passive-Aggressive Peer

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Harvard Business Review

9:30 AM Tuesday December 14, 2010

You're at the weekly team meeting. Everyone around the table vigorously nods their heads and agrees to a series of action steps. Meeting ends. Three days later, you find out that one of your peers must have blacked out during the head nodding — because he went off and did his own thing. And it's not the first time he's done this... it happens over and over again. Welcome to the passive-aggressive peer club.

What is the meaning of the paradoxical term *passive aggression*, all too often loosely used to describe fellow coworkers (and relatives, too, but that's a whole other blog post not befitting of HBR)? According to the National Institutes of Health, a passive aggressive condition is one in which a person seems to actively comply with the desires and needs of others, but actually passively resists them. The NIH goes on to explain that a passive-aggressive person may *appear* to comply with another's wishes and may even demonstrate enthusiasm for those wishes. *However*, (ominous music here) the person will tend to perform the requested action too late to be helpful or in a way that is useless or straight up sabotages the action to show anger that he cannot express in words. We've seen our share of passive-aggressive peers in our work lifetime. How about you?

Enough with the diagnosis and let's get to the good stuff. After all, you've got a job to do, results to deliver, and an organization to run. How do you deal with the passive-aggressive peer in your life without losing it? This type of behavior can derail your efforts to get results. And, the fact that this person is a peer makes it more challenging because you have to influence without authority. Before we explore some coping strategies, we are going to assume that you've already tried giving your peer effective feedback and it hasn't worked. If you haven't given him feedback, start there. Tell him what you observe and the impact it's having and give him suggestions as to how he can approach the situation differently. If feedback works, fantastic. If not, here are a few other things you can focus on to help minimize the noise this relationship causes:

1. **Focus on the Problem, not the Person**  
Be honest with yourself. Has your past experience with your passive-aggressive peer negatively tinted every interaction you have with him? If so, recognize that this may be contributing to the difficulty of the relationship. Stop focusing on his personality and everything that bothers you about it. You can not force him to change. What you can do is focus on how to achieve the actual work issue at hand despite your peer's style. This will help you move forward instead of pining over a more ideal situation. Wishful thinking that your peer will see the light and change overnight is fruitless.
2. **Don't Take it Personally**  
This is a simple one: stop thinking it's all about you. The chances that your peer is passive aggressive with other team members is high. But don't take our word for it. Observe him in action (or lack thereof) with others. What do you notice? You'll probably see that he behaves the same way with them (i.e., says the presentation looks fine and then completely reworks it at the last minute). If this looks familiar and his behavior is pervasive with others and not just you, stop taking it personally. This step alone can relieve some of the personal toll you take from dealing with this individual. You need all the energy you can fathom as a leader — don't waste one ounce of it trying to figure out why he acts this way with you.
3. **Focus on Follow Through**

Remember that you sit on a team — not alone in a silo. Use the strength that lies in your team to deal with your peer. We're not suggesting that you gang up on him! Rather, have teammates confirm expectations. For example, if you're in a meeting discussing next steps, make sure everyone articulates what they heard and verbally communicates what they commit to in specific terms (not just head nodding). This will accomplish two things: (1) your peer will have to openly declare his commitment to follow through and (2) the rest of the team will expect follow through. Ensure there are ways to solidify expectation setting and follow through across the team.

Practice these steps. They may not completely remedy your peer's approach but they certainly will help buffer some of the noise this situation is causing. What's been your experience in dealing with passive-aggressive peers? What strategies have you used to deal with the situation?