

Avoid The Rusty Nail

5 Strategies To Minimize The Threat Of Organizational Lockjaw

By Kendall C. Wright, President of Entelechy Training and Development, Inc.

When we were youngsters it seemed my brother and I were always receiving warnings from our parents, relatives, and neighbors. "Don't go there..., watch out for that..., be careful when you..., " and the list goes on. Apparently, there were many dangers lurking just out of sight in our urban wonderland, and all of them were capable of doing serious damage to a young child. In retrospect, it's a miracle my brother and I aren't severely paranoid and burdened with a long list of phobias.

One of my most unforgettable (terrifying) warnings was to avoid the rusty nail. Undisputedly, the rusty nail was at the top of the list of most menacing hazards. As I got older, I realized that the literal and metaphor representation of that particular warning was amazing. Avoiding the rusty nails was good counsel then, and extremely wise counsel today.

Back in the day, to accidentally step on a rusty nail while wearing a pair of Chuck Taylor's, PF Flyers, or Nike Cortez was a guaranteed trip to the emergency room. Trust me on that one, I remember well. You see as we played, climbed fences, and explored demolition sites, we weren't thinking about rusty nails – that is until one reached out and ripped a swath of skin off an arm or pierced the bottom of a shoe. Of course, once injured, the primary concern was the threat of tetanus, or "lockjaw" as my Grandmother called it. A wound from a rusty nail is, indeed, a painful and potentially very dangerous situation.

Sadly, in many organizations, rusty nails are an ever present danger. In fact, these rusty nails are practically everywhere and avoiding them has become a full time job. In the work environment, a rusty nail is analogous to any form of passive aggressive behavior. Simply defined, passive aggressive behaviors are gestures which appear to be made out of goodwill, but actually mask a malicious intent. These behaviors are problematic and can easily poison the life blood of an organization in short order. While not always easy to spot (hence the title passive aggressive), these behaviors must be addressed and abated.

A few common forms of passive aggressive behavior in the workplace include:

- Appearing to "ask" a question while actually making a statement
- Innuendo suggesting incompetence of peers and/or supervisors
- Character assassination of co-workers and/or supervisors
- Hypersensitivity to being held accountable
- Barbs and digs in the form of humor
- Bouts of selective amnesia
- Work flow sabotage

Passive aggressive behaviors thrive in oppressive, super restrictive environments. Particularly in environments where the associates deem the leadership practices to be unfair or unjust.

In a striking example of cosmic irony, consider this - one of the first indicators of tetanus is muscle spasms in the jaw area, also known as lockjaw. As a way of combating their disempowerment, associates may opt to become passive aggressive in their dealing with fellow employees, as well as their immediate leaders.

Here are 5 strategies to minimize passive aggressive behaviors within your sphere of influence:

Establish Respect As Your Protocol. The best preventative measure against passive aggressive behavior in the workplace to treat others with respect. When people feel respected, they also feel they can voice their concerns in an open and honest dialogue. Make no mistake, disrespectful leadership practices fuel passive aggressive behaviors.

Exterminate Misconceptions. Clear up any and all misconception regarding where you stand on this issue. There can be no question about whether you tolerant passive aggressive behaviors within your team dynamic. State your position and expectation, and lead accordingly. Directly addressing the inappropriate behaviors is a key requirement in eradicating the problem of passive aggression.

Elaborate On The “Why’s.” Sharing the logic of how decisions are made (as detailed as permissible), helps to build trust and respect. Even if your direct reports disagree, they can’t say they weren’t informed. Transparency is a powerful tool in preventing and combating passive aggressive behaviors in the workplace.

Equip Everyone. Give your direct reports the tools to explore and express their feelings in constructive and productive ways. Learning about emotional intelligence and how to conduct an accountability conversation will empower employees (and leaders) to address their concerns in a positive and professional manner. When your associates have the right tools they are less inclined to pursue passive aggressive solutions.

Embrace the New Culture. As you see progress, recognize and reward those making strides toward the new norm. The old adage of rewarding what you want repeated is certainly apropos to this challenge. The culture changes as individuals within the culture change. Replace **passive aggression** with **proactivity** and **accountability**.

The implementation of these five strategies will position you and your direct reports to have a much more honest and open work environment. Just as it’s hard to focus on anything else once you step on a rusty nail, it is equally as hard to stay focused on the tasks at hand if you must contend with the distraction of passive aggressive behavior.

Make it a priority, today, to remove the rusty nails and the threat of lockjaw from your team dynamic. In the process, you might also see a significant improvement in proficiency, productivity, and profitability.

Leadership Lesson: Can you recall warnings from our childhood to watch out for rusty nails? Inadvertently stepping on an old rusty nail was a serious matter, often resulting in “lockjaw” if untreated. The same is true when it comes to addressing passive aggressive behaviors in the workplace. It is a serious matter, with potential negative consequences if unaddressed. These behaviors aren’t innocent nor are they unintentional. Passive aggressive behaviors are gestures which appear to be made out of goodwill, but actually mask a malicious intent. These behaviors are problematic and can poison the life blood of an organization.

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