

Management Checklist

Developing passive people

This is an excerpt from a [Chartered Management Institute](#) checklist providing practical advice and guidance enabling managers to check out how to do a range of tasks quickly and efficiently using concise, tried and tested information.

Introduction

This checklist is for line managers handling individuals who are too compliant, too conciliatory or too self-effacing to make a positive impact. The aim is to help managers identify the problem and tackle it by making progress towards a more assertive and confident approach.

Definition

Passive people are often pleasant and eager to please - even too pleasant and too eager, as passive behaviour is generally characterised by the desire to avoid conflict and to always please others. Passive people may not want to face up to difficult problems and situations because they do not wish to upset others.

They may give in to unrealistic and unachievable demands, saying "yes" when they need to say "no", or at least "but". They may keep problems to themselves and play it safe to avoid any risks. At worst, they turn into "yes people" who tell you what they think you want to hear, rather than what they really feel. This can lead to a spiralling effect - they gradually lose the confidence of colleagues, including their manager. The manager's role is to help people develop and become more assertive.

Action checklist

1. Understand the problem - why people are passive

Be clear why people behave in this way. Only then can you start to get inside the problem and help the passive person. Reasons why people behave passively include:

- ✓ the mistaken belief they will be disliked if they disagree
- ✓ the feeling that other people are threatening
- ✓ failing to understand they have the right to their own views and ideas
- ✓ not having confidence in their own views and ideas
- ✓ no knowledge of assertiveness techniques

It is important to realise that for most passive people the attitudes and behaviour are deeply ingrained. They are not something that can be changed overnight; simply telling a passive person to "assert themselves more" can make the situation worse. You need to empathise with the person's problems but be committed to changing the way they think and behave. Be aware of cultural differences.

2. Understand the problem - how passive people react

Often passive people confuse assertive with aggressive behaviour and find it difficult to act assertively. They think if they make a firm statement they are being aggressive, and they equate passive behaviour with politeness. It is important to spot these reactions - don't assume a polite smile means everything is fine.

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3. Spot the problem

Take time to look for passive behaviour in your team. This can be difficult because on the surface passive people may seem to be perfectly content. Three key indicators of passive behaviour are:

- ✓ spoken language - people who behave passively tend to use words like, "I'm sorry to bother you, but...", or "I know I'm probably wrong, but..."
- ✓ body language - tell-tale signs of passive behaviour include:
 - an inability to make eye-contact
 - stooping, and keeping their head down
 - nervous gestures, like fingering their collar or playing with a pencil
 - speaking abnormally quietly
 - using an excessive amount of "ums" and "ers".
- ✓ work results - passive people tend not to want to disappoint or upset people, so they may take on too much work, get overloaded and then can't keep up.

4. Begin to address the problem

Too often managers allow passive behaviour to continue unchecked as it poses no immediate problem. However, it is important to start getting to grips with it as soon as you've spotted that it's there. Firstly communicate with the person, and, in this case, communication means more listening than speaking.

Find time to ask questions and listen - quietly and privately - to the person about their passive behaviour. The idea is to start modifying behaviour which should help to change underlying attitudes. Be clear early on that you think it is a problem that needs acting on, and begin to reflect on how you can help.

5. Be a role model

Show how effective assertive behaviour can be by doing it yourself. If a passive member of staff can see that their manager acts assertively, listens to problems and finds constructive solutions without apportioning blame, they are more likely to be encouraged to act the same way themselves.

6. Give your approval and encouragement

Make it clear always that the person has no need to fear. One of the roots of passive behaviour is that people are fearful of disapproval and of getting things wrong. Define your expectations of them. Make it clear that you will approve of assertive behaviour and disapprove of passivity. Given the nature of the passive individual, they will want to please you and conform, so establishing acceptable behaviour standards is helpful. Encourage a climate at work that actually allows people to release their fear.

The full Management Checklist is part of a series 'CheckPoint' service offered by the Chartered Management Institute. Focusing on issues relating to people management and personal effectiveness, further information can be viewed at www.managers.org.uk/checkpoint or by calling (0)1536 207 373 to request a sample of what Checkpoint has to offer.