

Employee Almanac

Lea McLeod



How to Deal With the 5 Most Negative Types of Co-workers

By [Lea McLeod, M.A.](#)

I used to work with a colleague on the opposite coast, so her day started three hours before mine. And so, it was quite typical to check my voicemail first thing in the morning and hear an angry voice: “Lea, it’s Petra. Call me as soon as you get in.” Just listening her messages was exhausting, and the return phone calls were equally draining. Not a fun way to start the day.

In my entire career, she was the most [difficult person I’ve ever worked with](#). You see, Petra was incredibly negative. Every conversation was full of drama: She’d ramble on about a bunch of issues she was having with a partner company, for example, then tell me I’d better get them straightened out. In the end, not only did I have to [put out fires with the partner](#), but I also had to fight battles on my own team to get anything done. (It’s comical to note that I outranked Petra—and that she had created nearly all of the problems!)

Now, I’m sure there’s some deep and weighty scientific reason why negative people are such energy sucks. But all I know is, they just are. And when you’re surrounded by them, it’s certainly a challenge, as both a manager and a colleague. That said, you can’t control other people; the only thing you can control is the way you choose to respond to them. With that in mind, I like to think of workplace negativity as an opportunity to [hone self-advocacy](#), assertiveness, and boundary skills. (Petra sure taught me how to do that!)

Here are some of the most common types of negative workplace personalities I’ve encountered—and some ideas on how to effectively deal with them.

1. The Bad News Bears

Like Petra, these folks revel in the negative. They can’t wait to tell you that the supplier made a mistake, the executive is ticked off, and someone’s head is going to roll. But as much as they thrive on sharing this negativity, it’s incredibly draining for you. (With good reason: Research shows that workplace negativity [creates a toxic environment](#) that has an adverse impact on your mental, emotional, and physical well-being.)

Solution

Deal with the real issue at hand—if in fact there is one—and then walk away. I became a master at this when I was forced to listen to Petra’s travails. If there was something I could do to help the situation, I did it (like sucking it up and calling the client she’d ticked off). I also worked on [managing my own stress level](#) by simply listening quietly or asking clarifying questions until I could end the conversation).

But mostly, her spiels were non-productive venting sessions that certainly didn’t deserve much of my time. To exit the conversation gracefully (and quickly), try using quick getaway phrases, like “I have a phone call I need to jump on,” or “[I need to prep for the meeting](#) this afternoon.”

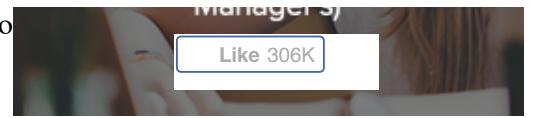
themuse

Like Us on Facebook.
It'll Be Great for Your Career
(and Our Social Media
Manager's)

2. The Gossip Mongers

In a corporate environment, it can sometimes seem [like the rumors never stop](#). So, during a company layoff, a new manager was hired, half the department’s getting fired, or no one’s

these rumors get repeated over and over, usually by the same people, who just lo
what's going on.



Solution

Gossip mongers often have little regard for fact. So, when I hear something outrageous or questionable, I push for real answers. “Oh, wow, that sounds pretty extreme. Is that a fact? Or did you hear that from someone?” You’ll quickly set the expectation that you won’t engage in frivolous chatter that’s not based in fact. In turn, gossips will likely steer clear of you because asking for facts takes all the fun out of it for them.

Another strategy is to express helplessness. When a co-worker starts spinning the gossip yarn (“I heard the boss knows that Sam’s looking for a new job—what do you think he’s going to do?”), shrug and say “I can’t help you with that one. Sorry.” If the gossiper pushes, don’t be afraid to establish your personal boundaries: “Actually, I don’t like to talk office politics; it’s not really any of my business.” Then excuse yourself from the conversation.

3. The Drama Queens (or Kings)

These spotlight-lovers have a high need for attention, and they often drain their co-workers’ time and energy by the dramatics they employ in search of the spotlight.

You know the type: This is the person whose [workload is bigger than anyone else's](#), who has the *worst* flu symptoms during cold season, and whose clients are the *most* annoying. They thrive on chaos and will one-up any story you have. “You think that was a bad client? Last week, I had to drive two hours to a client’s house just to bring him work samples!”

Sure, level-headed you would probably take the situation in stride and let the disruption roll off your back—but the drama queen believes he or she is the only one to ever experience such an event, and it’s [worthy of a wrath-laden rant](#).

Solution

One way you can nip this in the bud is to refuse to bite when the drama starts rolling. You see, since drama queens want to be the center of attention, the more you respond to their drama (“Oh my gosh, that really happened to you?”), the more you feed the beast. Instead, simply ignore the rants, and go on about your business. Your message—“I’m not interested”—will eventually be received.

Also, [don't be afraid to give some honest feedback](#). Convey that you understand your colleague’s concerns, but there’s probably a better way for him or her to deal with them. For example, “Jackson, I know you have a big workload, but if you’re feeling overwhelmed and overworked, you should probably [talk to your manager](#).” And when you say it, make sure to stay calm and act rationally, so that you’re not adding to the drama.

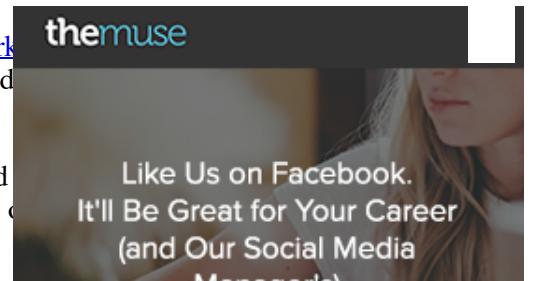
4. The Chicken Littles

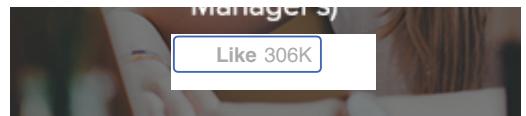
Just like the children’s tale, with these folks, the sky is always falling. If you share a piece of good news with them (“We got the account!”), they’ll respond [with a pessimistic reaction](#) that you probably didn’t expect (or want): “Oh, I’ve heard that client is a real pain. They’ll take so much time that we’ll never make money.”

Solution

In this situation, it’s best to confront the situation head-on and [give your co-worker](#) her behavior affects the rest of the team: “Pat, when you rain on someone’s good mood, it makes the new teammates find it a bit upsetting. Mind toning it down just a bit?”

I’ve found that most chicken littles don’t realize how negative they’re being and how it affects others. By gently pointing it out, you can help them make the correction and be supportive of the team.





5. The Victims

Victims blame others for their circumstances. Have you ever heard someone say the boss was out to get him or her? Victim. How about the person who [blamed a missed deadline](#) on the guys in accounting who “didn’t get the report to me on time?” Victim.

[Co-workers with a victim syndrome](#) constantly complain about everything bad that’s happening in their lives. What’s worse, they don’t believe they have any ownership or control of the situation, so in their eyes, everything is being done *to* them. They often suspect there’s some huge universal conspiracy that is firmly rooted against their success. And they love to talk about it.

Solution

It can be hard to tell someone that he or she is always negative, so try telling him or her what *you* really need: more positive engagement in your day. Try, “I’ve noticed that whenever we chat, the conversation tends to focus on the negative. I don’t know about you, but I work better when I’m surrounded by positivity. Why don’t you tell me about something that’s going well for you?”

You can also ask what they could have done to avoid the situation, a strategy that works well with your employees. For example, “That’s too bad. [What could you have done differently](#) to make sure the accounting report was in your hands on time?”

The next time you feel yourself getting sucked into a negative workplace vortex, don’t let it drain you dry—try one of these techniques to deal with it, and bring some positivity back into your office.

Image of [negative co-worker courtesy of Shutterstock](#).

Can We Send You a Helpful Email?

More articles like this one, job opportunities you'll actually like, and advice that doesn't sound like it was written in the '80s.

Success!

Check your inbox for your first installment of Muse goodness.

Was this helpful? [Book 1-on-1 time with the author](#)



Lea McLeod coaches people in their jobs when the going gets tough. Bad bosses that keeps you working too long. She's the founder of [the Job Success Lab](#) and a Get started with her free [21 Days to Peace at Work e-series](#). Book one-on-one co [Coach Connect](#).

