

Dealing With Spoiled Employee at Work Passive-Aggressive Behavior in Organizations

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Abstract. *The phenomenon of passive-aggressive behavior among employees is increasing along with the organizations' increasing pressure to compete on a global level. This study aims to describe passive-aggressive behavior in the world of work. Passive-aggressive is a person's self-defense mechanism when he has to face someone who is more powerful (superior) and he doesn't like. He didn't dare to express his displeasure assertively. The basis of this behavior is conflict-avoidance, in which the employee initially agrees to perform a task according to the leader's instructions, but in the end the task is abandoned. The reasons for his refusal are also typical, namely procrastination, laziness, wanting to take revenge on their leaders, and wanting to control the situation in the organization. The impact of passive-aggressive behavior on the organization can be serious (sabotage), but it is difficult to be punished. This is because at first the employee behaved sweetly like being obedient to the leader, but in the end he aggressively abandoned the task. This paper describes the typical characteristics of employees who behave like spoiled children and the leader's strategies to overcome them.*

Key words: *passive-aggressive, unassertive, neglect of duty*

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I. Introduction

Not everyone can be assertive when dealing with someone who is considered more powerful (superior). The people in power may be the boss at work, a co-worker whose character is dominant, his spouse, or his parents. In the workplace, staying away from an angry boss is considered safer than confronting them openly or being defiant to them. This is indicated by the many tips for employees to deal with angry leaders (Medina, 2019) rather than tips for dominant leaders to control themselves. Employees are asked to change themselves for the better so as not to become the target of their boss's anger. This is because the leader is perceived as the party that controls the lives of many people so that it is considered right, and employees consider themselves to be very dependent on their work for a living, so they are willing to be considered the wrong party and have to change themselves.

These suggestions to change themselves are indeed good for employees to adapt to their work environment. The problem is, changing oneself is a painful, long process, and requires a very strong internal motivation (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006). Not many employees are willing to change themselves. In addition, employees who are asked to change themselves by the leader might argue that the leader (ruler) is not necessarily the right party. Employees who feel cornered but refuse to change themselves tend to use passive-aggressive mechanisms to protect their egos.

Passive-aggressive is a person's self-defense mechanism when he wants to refuse instructions from someone he considers more powerful (superior), but he does not dare to express his rejection assertively. In the world of work, this passive-aggressive behavior is often carried out by employees against their leaders. The interesting thing is that when the leader is not around, employees dare to express their rejection of their instructions aggressively. The employee usually agrees to all the instructions from the boss, but in the end he doesn't do his job at all. The reasons that most often arise are that he forgets the task, feels that it is not his main task, or feels that no one has told him beforehand (Whitson, 2010). The impact of passive aggressive behavior in the world of work can be minor to very serious, for example, sabotage of office equipment (Robinson & Bennet, 1995).

This study aims to describe situations in organizations that encourage the employees' passive aggressive behavior. The emphasis is on external factors instead of internal factors because this paper is preventive in nature. Therefore, this study is useful for organizational leaders to recognize the symptoms of passive aggressive behavior in employees. Leaders should be wary of employees who behave passive-aggressively because the consequences can be serious. This paper is subsequently emphasized on passive aggressive behavior instead of active aggressiveness; it is because passive-aggressive behavior has received less attention from many researchers (Schanz, et al., 2021).

Definition of Passive Aggressive Behavior

This passive aggressive behavior is closely related to aggressiveness. Aggressiveness is all forms of behavior which is basically the intention to hurt someone, oneself or an object (Franzoi, 2003). This understanding is the active aggressiveness. There are two types of active aggressiveness, namely instrumental aggression and hostile aggressiveness. Instrumental aggressiveness is behavior that is basically the intention to hurt or injure another party, so that the perpetrator can achieve other goals. The appearance of his behavior is clearly hurting the victim. For example, a person attacks so that he can get property from the victim. Hostile aggressiveness is behavior whose basic intention and purpose is to harm or kill the victim. This intention arose because the perpetrator was angry with the victim. The behavior displayed is also clearly hurting others. For example, the individual kills the victim because the victim is thought to have done something that hurt him.

Passive-aggressive behavior, on the contrary, is not shown explicitly or indirectly. Even the behavior shown is sweet but confusing. They are used to say 'yes' even though they are actually 'no'. However, this behavior is indeed aggressive because it reflects anger and hostility. On the other hand, this behavior is also passive because it reflects fear and anxiety so that the appearance of the behavior is not aggressive. Even passive-aggressive behavior is often called without action, so the motive for passive-aggressiveness is the rejection of aggressiveness (McKee, 2019). Passive-aggressive is a person's nature in carrying out self-defense mechanisms, namely protecting the ego from various emotional disturbances. This self-defense mechanism is relatively permanent or tends to be stable. That is, when a person faces things that bother him or deals with stress, unconsciously the self-defense mechanism will appear (Schanz, et al., 2021; Whitson, 2010).

The Importance of Discussing Passive-Aggressive Behavior

Passive-aggressive behavior, especially those that occur in organizations, is very important to discuss. This is because the passive-aggressive behavior is categorized as toxic to the organization, and the rates tend to be high (Appelbaum & Shapiro, 2006). About 21,000 respondents in Europe and America were asked to fill out an instrument to measure organizational DNA. The measuring instrument was developed by Booz Allen Hamilton. The measurement results are 25% or 5,250 respondents said that the organization they work for has passive-aggressive characteristics. The organizations they work for include small to large organizations, and are engaged in manufacturing and service. This description is a serious sign, because passive-aggressive organizations are unhealthy organizations (Booz Allen Hamilton, 2004). The next data is that organizations that experience passive-aggression are ranked first on the list of other unhealthy organizations (Neilson, Pasternack & Van Nuys, 2005).

Passive-aggressive behavior is the impact of an organization that is under pressure, so that the performance of its employees is not efficient. Research involving 84 employees of NGOs (Non-Government Organizations) in India found that organizations experiencing stress accounted for 20.8% of the occurrence of self-pity behavior (one of the indications of passive-aggressive behavior) (Shah & Pethe, 2006). This passive-aggressive behavior also increases due to the increase in the type of work that has a service nature, the dislike of workers' unions is increasing, and the ethnicity of employees is increasingly diverse as a result of smooth transportation (Lambercht, 2010). Heterogeneous ethnic composition will make the flow of communication within the organization vulnerable to disruption, and passive-aggressive behavior is often displayed. Workers' unions are more pro to employees than the leadership of the organization. If the employee is hostile to the leader and there is no Union, the employee is confused where to report their problems. One of the behaviors that employees often display as a form of protest to management is the passive-aggressive behavior. The type of work in service field also triggers the emergence of passive-aggressive behavior because not many people are happy with this service type of work. Company employees in the service sector will behave sweetly in front of costumers but behind their back, they will ignore the costumers' requests.

The harm caused by this passive-aggressive behavior can have a minor or serious impact on both the organization and the employees themselves (interpersonal relationships). Robinson and Bennett explained the passive-aggressive behavior through the image below (Appelbaum, Iaconi & Matousek, 2007).



Figure 1 shows that deviant behavior in an organizational context has two dimensions. The first dimension is the impact of the negative behavior on the organization or relationships between individuals (interpersonal). The second dimension, negative behavior has a serious or minor impact (less serious). Quadrant I is that negative behavior has a serious impact on the sustainability of the organization. Examples of behavior are sabotaging equipment, accepting bribes, lying about working hours, and stealing the organization's property (Dranitsaris, 2013; Whitson, 2010). The organization's work schedule is disrupted; it may even stop because employees have committed sabotage. Research involving 395 college students shows that this passive-aggressive behavior has influenced the occurrence (23.4%) of emotional exhaustion (Liu & Rolof, 2015). Even employee deviant behavior has accounted for 30% of organizational failure (Appelbaum & Roy-Girard, 2007). These behaviors are harmful to the organization because they are included in the criteria for corruption.

Quadrant II is the negative behavior that harms the organization, but the impact is less serious. Examples of behavior are leaving early from office hours, extending breaks, deliberately working late, and wasting materials. This behavior is detrimental to the organization because employees work inefficiently. If management is not alert and allows negative behavior to continue, the impact may be serious. This occurs in the behavior of extending rest hours and leaving early, which actually includes time corruption. The emergence of behavior in quadrant II is a sign for the organization to improve its functions.

Quadrant III is the negative behavior that harms the relationship between employees, but the impact is less serious. Examples of behavior are excessively siding with certain divisions, gossiping with coworkers, blaming coworkers, and competing on things that are not profitable. This partisanship tends to cause envy in the division that has received less attention. Examples of competitive behavior on things that are not profitable are competing in terms of work costumes, vehicles, and other work attributes

Quadrant IV is the negative behavior that harms the relationship between employees, and the impact is serious. Examples of behavior are sexual harassment, verbal harassment, stealing co-workers' belongings, and endangering co-workers. Possibly, negative behavior in quadrant IV is related to law. If that happens, then the behavior will be a bad advertisement about the organization, so it changes position to quadrant I.

Conflict Theory and Passive-Aggressive Behavior

The passive-aggressive behavior in this study will be explained through situations that exist in the organization (company). In the world of work, this passive-aggressive behavior is a way for employees to deal with leaders they don't like. In organizations, active aggressive behavior will certainly get punishment or rejection from people. This is because the impact of being active aggressive is obvious, painful, hostile, and can even lead to criminal penalties. In addition, people, especially those from a collective cultural background, tend to be displeased with open conflict. They prefer if the work situation seems fine, even though there are actually many irregularities in the organization (Triandis, 2002). So if there is a leader who is disliked, the employee's rejection response is usually not in the form of active-aggressive but in the form of passive-aggressive behavior.

The occurrence of passive-aggressive behavior indicates that there is conflict in the organization. The existence of conflict indicates that there are efforts to manage social interactions that are interdependent among employees. The conflict comes from the desire to adopt things that come from outside and then integrate them to manage the situation in the organization. As a result, the rules in the organization must be changed. In essence, change is a disruption (disruption) and disturbances that are not managed properly will cause conflict. One of the disturbing conflicts is the passive-aggressive behavior (Gelfand, Leslie & Keller, 2007).

An explanation of the passive-aggressive phenomenon would be more appropriate by using the theory of conflict (Gelfand et al., 2007). The theory explains that when employees behave passive-aggressively, it means that cultural norms in the organization are also managed passive-aggressively. In such a culture, when employees face conflict they respond passively to express disapproval. There is no open discussion, because the organization also does not condition openness. There are no people who share information with each other, even important information is only kept for himself or his group. People deliberately work slowly to prevent others from achieving good performance in the organization. They are also reluctant to interact with each other and even withdraw themselves from their co-workers. Co-workers tend to drop each other (unhealthy work competition), and do not care about larger organizational goals or achievements. The most important thing for them is to achieve their own goal. So the characteristic of passive-aggressive behavior is that there are deliberate actions that are negligent in nature with the aim of harming other parties. In a passive-aggressive conflict management culture, trusted co-workers should be embraced but untrustworthy friends (enemies) should be embraced even more closely. The goal is that the enemy can be controlled.

Passive-aggressive behavior tends to exist in organizations where the bureaucracy is strictly enforced, highly disciplined, has zero tolerance, formalization of tasks is strong, and centralization. Such bureaucracy is common when the leader is authoritarian. So what is important is not to deviate from the bureaucratic flow process instead of achieving organizational goals at a macro level. Employees have no autonomy at all, so employees feel low self-efficacy in solving work problems. Many of its employees have introverted personality types and find it difficult to agree (low agreeableness). On demographic characteristics, organizational culture tends to be passive-aggressive when the majority of the employees' gender is female. This is because women tend to be more passive than men, and women tend to show aggressiveness that is indirect or subtle (Gelfand, et al., 2007).

Causes of Passive-Aggressive Behavior

The causes of employees in an organization have passive-aggressive behavior are:

- 1) Hereditary factors. This hereditary factor is an innate factor or that has been in the individual since birth, so it is difficult to change. Hereditary factors include imbalances of hormones, enzymes and chemicals in the blood. This hereditary factor will direct the emergence of difficult behaviors such as passive aggressiveness. In addition, physical conditions that are not ideal will make it difficult for a person to be accepted by his environment, so that individuals learn to defend themselves from ridicule and develop their personality. One of the self-defense mechanisms he developed was passive aggressive.
- 2) Patterns of education in childhood. The pattern of education in the family where direct emotional expression is not accustomed will make children learn not to express emotions openly (Hopwood, et al., 2009). This situation may become a traumatic experience for the child (Schanz, et al., 2021). In such family situations, children learn to be less assertive and learn to channel their frustrated emotions passively. Passive communication occurs because children's self-esteem is low, so children keep opinions only for themselves. In learning places, these children do not dare to express their needs, are shy, afraid, quiet and isolated from the association of their friends and teachers (Kirana & Verauli, 2018).
- 3) Characteristics of the situation. When someone is in a social situation where the behavior of expressing emotions openly is not allowed, then the individual will learn to respond to the anger of others in hidden or subtle ways. Such situations are for example family events or situations at work
- 4) Tendency to choose the easy way. Communicating assertively and expressing emotions clearly is not an easy thing. Especially if the communication is addressed to the leaders (people who have a higher position than the individual). When the individual is in a difficult or scary situation, passive aggressive behavior will be chosen because it is easy and there is no need to confront the source of anger. Confronting is an act that requires courage, and not everyone has the courage to directly confront the source of anger.

Characteristics of Passive-Aggressive Employees

To know these passive-aggressive employees, their characteristics must be understood. They are people who often perceive themselves as victims (Kets de Vries, 2012). This perception is a psychological symptom commonly known as self-handicapping, self-helplessness or feeling powerless. This feeling of helplessness is the result of learning (Shah & Pethe, 2006), in which individuals often encounter failures in their lives so that they believe that they are destined to be lifelong losers. Because he always feels helpless, he always blames external parties as the cause of his failure. To improve the situation, it is the external party that must change, not him. This is because he is the victim, so there is no need to change. His downfall is expected to win the sympathy of others.

This passive-aggressive employee is confusing. On one hand, his work performance is poor, but strangely he refuses to be helped. Even all forms of help from colleagues to make the situation better, tend to be refused (Kets de Vries, 2012). His work performance is bad because he is used to delay things he has to do (procrastination). To save himself so that he is not perceived badly by his co-workers, he always blames his boss. He is good at turning the facts around even if he needs to lie, to calm himself down. Such employees are even able to tell about their suffering of having been 'persecuted' by the leader, and they are unable to deal with the leader. He has made his job status in the organization a high risk. In comparison, normal employees will generally try their best to achieve high performance, so as not to be fired.

Further, the characteristic of the passive-aggressive behavior is that the employee often hides information that is valuable to the organization. When the employee occupies a strategic position and gets a lot of information, he will hide the information. When the organization is on the verge of collapse because this valuable information is not conveyed, then he will only say that the destruction is not his responsibility. He is good at 'washing his hands', so that all mistakes are the leader's fault, not him (Dranitsari, 2016; Unterberg, 2003).

Employees who behave passive-aggressively are used to delay his work (procrastination) and often come late to attend meeting invitations. He often announces his absence at the last minute. He knows very well that his position in the organization is very important and he has a lot of important information so that his presence is eagerly awaited by other employees. He is good at taking advantage of the situation to make the other party miserable. The classic reason for procrastination is that the computer is down. The interesting thing is that his computer is always in the worst damage condition compared to other employees. This employee has worked inefficiently. This characteristic of always blaming a broken computer is a sign of the employee's passive-aggressive behavior.

Further, the next characteristic of these employees are they often cannot meet the leader's expectations. When a task is given by the leader with the hope that the task can improve organizational performance, these passive-aggressive employees tend to ignore the expectations. He goes against the leader's instructions by not doing the given task, or do it but with very low quality. He is good at finding reasons for poor quality work; he would blame the wrong external factors.

The next characteristic of these passive-aggressive employees is they always take subtle and indirect aggressive actions. In fact, they often show sweet behavior in front of other people they don't like. When the leader or other person leaves, they will behave the opposite way. They ignore the leader's instructions, mocking and degrading other person. The impact of this passive-aggressive behavior may be serious, namely organizational sabotage. However, this kind of employee is difficult to be punished since he precedes his behavior with willingness or approval to carry out all the orders of the leader.

Next, the employee often show sulky and sullen behavior and always put forward arguments about the bad leaders in a way that is exhausting and unreasonable. His behavior is exactly like a spoiled child, who disappointed if his wishes are not fulfilled. If he is in an important position then all elements of the organization will certainly be chaotic. The main topics of his conversations are about his complaints working in the organization. He always complains about being unlucky in life.

The next characteristic is that employees are used to comment enviously about their successful co-workers. This comment is used as a justification that the leader does not pay attention to him, but pays more attention to the successful co-worker. This is an indication that the individual always feels victimized by the successful boss or co-worker.

Employees who are used to behave passive-aggressive are lazy people. To cover up his laziness, he often pretends to forget doing an assignment or forget to come to a meeting. In addition, he also diligently apologized and promised not to repeat it, but that promise was never realized. The promise is just to save his face.

Strategies to Cope with the Passive-Aggressive Behavior

The relevant problem to this passive-aggressive behavior is that leaders are confused about employees who behave in this passive-aggressive manner. This is because this passive-aggressive behavior is really harmful to the organization. To overcome this problem, leaders need to make fundamental changes to the organization. In order for change to run smoothly, there are three principles that must be considered, namely (Wood, 1998):

- 1) People always see situations in terms of their benefits. If the change in behavior brings advantages for him, then he is willing to change his behavior. On the other hand, if the change in behavior is harmful, then he is not willing to change.
- 2) The change must start from the employees themselves. If employees do not want to change themselves, there will be no change in behavior. The existence of a reward-punishment system will only change behavior temporarily, and the change is not fundamental.
- 3) Leaders can change the work environment and their own behavior as a model to motivate the change of behavior for their employees.

Based on the three principles of behavior change, leaders can create strategies to make the organization free from its employees' passive-aggressive behavior. The strategies are:

1. Leaders must be aware that passive-aggressive behavior is an attempt by spoiled employees to take revenge and control the organizational situation (Lambrecht, 2010). This awareness will make the leader more careful in making decisions.
2. The need for increased accuracy in document storage regarding the failure and success of completing employee tasks. The document is the basis for leaders to reprimand employees who have failed in carrying out their duties, so that employees cannot find justifications for their failure (Unterberg, 2003). Furthermore, the document also serves as feedback material and determination of treatment for the failed employee.
3. Based on the document of the employee's success in completing the task, the leader can explore the potential of the employee. This potential is useful for completing subsequent tasks, even if the task is only trivial. This way to make employees become more confident.
4. The leaders need to take adequate time to discuss with employees who behave passively-aggressively. The topic of discussion is about the adverse effects of passive-aggressive behavior on organizations. Discussions are held personally, so that employees are not embarrassed in front of their friends. The output of the discussion is to understand the causes of employee failure in completing tasks and to get employee commitment to carry out the next tasks better, to share information, not to commit procrastination and not to sabotage the organization.
5. Leaders need to be aware that their own behavior may reflect passive-aggressive characteristics. This is common in weak organizations which are also often referred to as passive-aggressive organizations (Bolton & Grawitch, 2011; Booz Allen Hamilton, 2004). The leader must be a model for his employees, so he deserves to be a role model. Furthermore, the employee performance appraisal system is also laid out in a transparent manner so that it can distinguish good, middle, and bad employees.

II. Discussion

The existence of employees with passive-aggressive characters in an organization is certainly not a coincidence, especially if the employee can last a long time in the organization. The employee has passed the selection test twice, namely the selection to enter the organization and the selection regarding the ability to survive in the organization. This means that passive-aggressive employees are of superior quality. However, the passive-aggressive behavior thrives when they are under stress (Unterberg, 2003) and also supported by passive-aggressive organizational situations (Lambrecht, 2010).

Leaders, who care about the sustainability of the organization, should be aware if an employee has behaved like a spoiled child. He demands that all his desires be fulfilled. In front of the leader he is willing to carry out all instructions (passive) but when the leader leaves then he does not carry out the instructions at all (aggressive). He does so to control the situation and to deal with his own anxiety. Leaders should be aware that passive-aggressive employees can last a long time in the organization, perhaps because the organization is also passive-aggressive (Bolton & Grawitch, 2011; Booz Allen Hamilton, 2004). Therefore, leaders should introspect that there are many things that need to be improved. The basic thing that needs to be addressed immediately is the behavior of the leader himself, which may reflect passive-aggressiveness as well.

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