

SHEDDING CROCODILE TEARS: HOW TO DEAL WITH PASSIVE- AGGRESSIVE EMPLOYEES AT WORKPLACES?¹



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ABSTRACT | The term, passive-aggressive mainly covers the hidden hostility of passive-aggressive behaviors that lead to counter-productive reactions at workplaces. Whether malicious or unintentional, passive aggressive behaviors damage relationships, interrupt workflow, cause unrest and spread of negative feelings in the organization. Moreover, a passive aggressive employee's behaviors affect the big picture of an organization's productivity on the whole negatively and it's also very hard and depressing to work with coworkers or bosses who often act passive-aggressively. Employees usually reflect passive-aggressive patterns and signs because it's such a tactic for conflict-avoidance face to face and it's more comfortable way of expressing covert feelings of anger to their supervisors or coworkers. For instance, stalling, sarcasm, postponing, the silent treatment, withholding information, and procrastination are common and certain signs of behaviors that passive-aggressive employees show at workplaces. In sum, in this conceptual paper, passive-aggressive behaviors will be identified in detail and the ways to handle with passive-aggressive employees at workplaces will be outlined. Then, in conclusion section, recommendations will be made in order to reduce negative effects of passive-aggressive employees at workplaces

Keywords: *Passive-aggressive, passive-aggressive behaviors, passive-aggressive employees*

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¹ The compliance of the relevant study with ethical rules has been declared.

TİMSAH GÖZYAŞLARI DÖKME:İŞYERLERİNDE PASİF- AGRESİF ÇALIŞANLARLA NASIL BAŞ EDİLİR?



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ÖZET | Pasif-Agresif kavramı esas olarak işyerlerinde verimliliği düşüren eylemlere yol açan gizli düşmanlığı içeren pasif-agresif davranışları kapsamaktadır. Sinsice veya kasıtlı olmasa da, pasif-agresif davranışlar ilişkilere zarar vermekte, iş akışını bozmakta, huzursuzluğa yol açarak örgütte olumsuz duyguların yayılmasına neden olmaktadır. Bunlara ek olarak, pasif-agresif bir çalışanın davranışları bütünsel olarak bir örgütün verimliliğini olumsuz yönde etkilemekte ve ayrıca pasif-agresif bir çalışanla veya yöneticiyle çalışmak oldukça zor ve moral bozucudur. Çalışanlar yüz yüze çatışmaktan kaçınmak için bir taktik olarak da pasif-agresif davranışlar göstermektedirler çünkü üstlerine veya iş arkadaşlarına olan öfkelerini gizli olarak ifade etmek daha konforlu bir yöntemdir. Örneğin, alaylı sözler söyleme, oyalama, işleri erteleme, sessiz kalma, bilgi saklama, işleri ağırdan alma işyerlerindeki yaygın ve belirgin olarak görülen pasif-agresif çalışan davranışlarıdır. Kısaca, bu çalışmada, pasif-agresif davranışlar detaylı olarak irdelenecek ve işyerlerinde pasif-agresif çalışanlarla başa çıkmanın yöntemleri ele alınacaktır. Daha sonra, sonuç bölümünde, işyerlerinde pasif-agresif çalışanların olumsuz etkilerinin azaltılması için önerilerde bulunulacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Pasif-Agresif, Pasif-Agresif Davranışlar, Pasif-Agresif Çalışanlar

Jel kodu: M10, M12, L20

Alan: İşletme

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1. INTRODUCTION

Aggression is one of the darkest sides of human nature. It can suddenly appear because of the multiple factors, especially depending on internal (e.g. age, gender, negative emotions, personality traits) and external (e.g. alcohol, violent media and weapons) causes. Plus, anger is one of the significant normal human emotions like happiness, anxiety, or sadness. It's so real and natural that everyone has experienced anger at some time in their lives. We the people get angry and ready to react physically when we confront threatening behaviors, hurt or threat from outside forces. Furthermore, anger is the hostile respond and violent behavior that can be observed easily by the people around. However, passive aggression is the expression of feelings of anger or annoyance without showing anger bluntly. It's a hidden anger and instead of communicating openly and, some people prefer to engage in insidious, passive-aggressive behaviors in order not to reveal themselves or to avoid face to face conflict and polemic.

Actually, it's not so easy to detect passive-aggressive behaviors at first. People who engage in these types of hostile behaviors reflect their negative or angry feelings in an indirect manner or misdirecting ways. And as a supervisor or a coworker, if anyone who exposes to passive aggressive behaviors, it's rather difficult for them to deal with these people or behaviors. Passive-aggressive people usually tend to control other people's emotions and behaviors or manipulate them as the way they think or wish at workplaces in many indirect ways. However, passive aggression, namely disguising anger with civil words or insidious tactics has an equal potential to destroy relationships and productivity at workplaces as well. The most dangerous thing about the passive aggressive behavior is that one can never think of being experienced passive aggressive behavior at that time or not. Because it merely depends on the perpetrator and only he/she knows when or how exactly. For instance, when you realize and hear that a rattlesnake is very close to you or a furious bull behind you, you will certainly get ready to react by running away to get rid of the danger or you might think of attacking against the threat but it is rather difficult if you realize the danger very late. Passive-aggressive behaviors come at you in sneaky ways that it's too late for you to react or stay clear just like, a coworker or a boa very close to you, just like hugging, but unfortunately it's too late when it begins to grip you so strongly that you cannot breathe anymore. In sum, in this study, passive-aggressive behaviors that are very common at workplaces will be identified and the ways of spotting and stopping them will be outlined.

2. PASSIVE AGGRESSION AND PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS AT WORKPLACES

2.1. Passive Aggression

Aggression refers to the behavior that the perpetrator intends to injure the target physically or psychologically. The perpetrator of the aggression is sure that the behavior will hurt or harm the target, and the target is ready to avoid the aggressive behavior. However, aggression does not always appear as violent acts, it sometimes appear as nonviolent aggression like swearing, saying negative things about someone publicly, insulting, and withdrawing from a conversation suddenly without any excuse, trying to hurt somebody by talking behind their back or gossiping about them (DeKeseredy, 2017, p.2; South Richardson, 2014, p. 222). Moreover, aggression is an observable behavior and it may appear in various forms ranging from relatively minor acts like name calling, quarrelling or pushing to more serious acts like fighting, pounding, hitting, raping, biting, kicking, or punching to harsh acts like wounding, stabbing, batting, shooting, or

killing (Allen & Anderson, 2017, p. 1). Besides, the underlying reasons of aggression mainly fall into four groups that are (Rubio-Garay et. al., 2016, p. 129);

- Emotions (e.g. negative action and reaction, anger),
- Cognition (e.g. values beliefs, life styles, appraisal, attitudes, memories, attribution),
- Self-Regulations (e.g. shame, blame, self-awareness, self-recognition, moral self-sanctions),
- Environmental factors (e.g. psychosocial stress, aversive stimulation, exposure to violent events or surroundings, psychosocial stress).

In addition, aggression mainly originates from brain dysfunction, adopting of aggressive scripts, lower levels of socialization, moral and ethical deficits, or exposure to aversive life-events and it has been maintained that aggression is the result of multiple factors and personality traits is one of them. The five factor model (FFM), which is the latest and widely adopted approach to focus on personality outlines that personality depends on five distinct features that are neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. So, it has been accepted that aggression is mainly associated with low agreeableness, low openness and low extraversion. Again, it's obvious that there is a positive relation between testosterone and aggression because individuals with higher testosterone levels tend to engage in more aggressive behaviors, and increases in testosterone are detected after showing dominance over other individuals (Eisner & Malti, 2015, p. 2; Hosie et al., 2014, p. 190; Allen & Anderson, 2017, p.11).

On the other hand, passive aggression is the phenomenon that covers the anger being expressed secretly and in an outwardly demure way, and both genetic and environmental reasons exist in the genesis of passive aggression. Passive-aggression mainly depends on suppressing angry feelings only later to come to reveal them indirectly and the indirect expression of anger is often associated with the chronic hostility and even certain single grievance and it rarely requires instant provocation (Kantor, 2017, pp.12-14). The indirectly expressed hostility seems to be the most significant feature of the passive-aggression and rigidity, resistance, resentment, reactance, and reversed reinforcement are the five interrelated psychological components of the passive-aggression. For example, rigidity and resentment are the most common factors that raise passive aggression at workplaces (Hughes & Brown, 2018 p.8). However, the diagnosis of personality disorders has developed considerably in current classification systems and according to Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), passive aggressiveness is one of the major negativistic personality disorders (Segal et al., 2015 p.1071).

From a historical point of view, passive-aggressiveness was first coined by Colonel William Menninger in a Technical Bulletin issued by the US War Department during World War II in 1945. In this bulletin, he asserted that the soldiers display aggressiveness through "passive measures," which he said appeared via behaviors like pouting, inadequate responses, passiveness, obstructionism or aggressive outbursts and stubbornness. It was a troublesome pattern of behavior among soldiers that they followed the orders but did so with benign disobedience and showed their hidden anger by late coming or forgot the duties that they had to carry out intentionally (Wetzler & Morey, 1999 p. 21). From a psychological point of view, passive-aggression is the description of the behavior pattern that consists of expressing negative feelings indirectly rather than directly. Passive-aggressives are highly cunning in showing their anger and they are the masters of covert abuse. There is not a connection between what they say and what they do. Therefore, it can be assumed that the roots of aggressive behaviors might have flourished in families with strict parents. It might be such a survival strategy for the children to employ repressing tactics and denying their feelings in order not to arouse their parents' wrath toward themselves. It can be

inferred that the children who have brought up in families where the honest, direct expression of feelings were forbidden or dangerous might turn into passive aggressives in the rest of their lives (De Vries, 2016 p.54). Actually, passive-aggression is about being dishonest to oneself, which makes it impossible to have an unproblematic relationship with others. Passive-aggression as a communication method doesn't make someone "bad" and it is certainly a tactic learned in childhood as a coping mechanism, a hard-to-break habit. Additionally, the origin behaviors of passive-aggression are simply found in childhood when majority of the individuals powerless to control a lot of facets of our lives. It's so clear that when one parent is more dominant and the other parent is subservient, children will normally adopt passive-aggressive tendencies. Yet, passive-aggression is a coping mechanism individuals use when they perceive themselves to be powerless or when they fear that using their power will cause unwanted outcomes, for instance, to conflict or loss of the job (Brandt, 2013 p.23).

2.2. Passive Aggressive Behaviors at Workplaces

In general, most examples of workplace aggression are verbal, physical and passive in nature, such as intentional inefficiency, talking behind someone's back, spreading rumors, and temporary compliance, stealing office supplies, using company equipment or giving someone the silent treatment. Besides, all types of aggression, whether overt or covert, leads to psychological ramifications and negative outcomes for the targeted employee and hinders the productivity implications in the organizations and destroys reputation of the organizations. Additionally, workplace aggression also has destructive impacts on individuals, families and society on the whole (Coombs & Holladay, 2004, p.481). The main reasons of the workplace aggression are employee perceptions of interpersonally unfair treatment from supervisors, various forms of injustice in the organization, interpersonal injustice in the organization (e.g. during performance evaluations or enactment of organizational procedures), employee perceptions of over controlled by their supervisors, abusive supervisors, impoliteness and unfair treatment from coworkers or supervisors and organizational factors like downsizing and layoffs, surveillance and increased workplace diversity (Mireille & Barling, 2004, p.9).

Passive-aggressive condition at work is one in which a person seems to actively comply with the wishes and needs of coworkers, but in fact passively resists them. Passive-aggressive employee may seem to comply with another's wishes and can even show enthusiasm for those wishes. On the other hand, he or she 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 cannot be expressed in words. This hidden anger simply spoils relationships, career and happiness in the organization. Plus, this type of behavior that is engaged by your coworker can derail your energy and efforts to get the job done (Jen Su & Wilkins, 2010, p.1). Passive-aggressiveness is an attempt to regain power and relieve the tension formed by the gap between anger and silence via incongruent and unproductive behaviors. Passive-aggressive people complain to each other, they withdraw, intend use sarcasm, and resist the person in quiet, insidiously defensible ways. They usually drag their feet, leave things undone intentionally, sabotage, procrastinate, run late, forgetting deadlines, misplacing documents, adopt manipulative actions or act stubbornly. In sum, passive aggressiveness depends on the feeling of powerlessness that flourishes in the fertile ground between anger and silence (Bregman, 2016, p. 1). Table 1. shows the most common passive aggressive behaviors at workplace:

Table 1. The Most Common Passive Aggressive Forms of Behaviors at Workplace

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Stubbornness | Forgetfulness | Procrastination | Deep sighs | Silent treatment |
| Inordinate dependency | Dawdling | Obstructionism | Incongruent verbal / non-verbal | Back stabbing |
| Slamming doors | Inward resentments | Acting helpless | Sullenness | Covert questioning |
| Acting hurt | Long coffee breaks | Late-coming | No carry-over learning | 3rd party griping |
| Intentional inefficiency | Absenteeism | Misunderstanding | “Inadvertent” barbs | Sniping |
| Somatic complaints | Pouting | Petty thievery | Poor quality work | Lack of loyalty |
| Inaction or stalling | Acts of revenge | Use sarcasm heavily | Speaking negatively behind someone’s back | Withholding praise or affection |

Source: (Gaines, L. 1996, pp.13-15). (Liu, E., & Roloff, M. E. 2015, pp. 25-40). (Davey, L. (2016, p. 1), (Gallo, A. 2016, p.1)

There are some more examples about passive-aggressive behaviors such as not doing some required or helpful action in the organization. In addition, forgetting to pick up you on time, losing you keys intentionally, or remaining silent when it is so important to tell about their ideas etc. are the other forms of aggressive behaviors at workplace. To sum up, employees at workplace often act passive-aggressively toward one another, leaving themselves in a deadlock of unresolved issues and it gradually destructs the morale of the employees at workplace. They usually play the victim or shift the blame to others (Murphy & Oberlin, 2016, p.4). Figure 1 displays the common passive-aggressive behaviors at workplace:

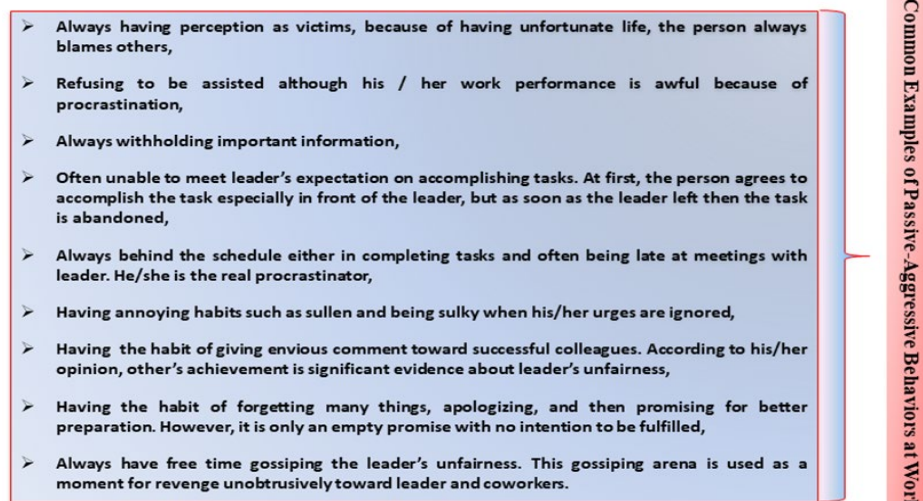


Figure 1. Common Examples of Passive-Aggressive Behaviors at Work

Source: Arundati Shinta, Eny Rohyati, Wahyu Widianoro, Dewi Handayani, (2016, pp. 647-48).

Neilson et al. (2005) maintained in their study that most organizations, which experience passive-aggressiveness, don't often start out full of entrenched resistance and it has been underlined that troubles dealing with the passive-aggressiveness progress step by step as the organization develops, via a series of well-intended but badly implemented organizational changes layered one on another so it can be inferred that passive-aggressive organizations are the most commonly large, complex enterprises whose seeds of resistance have usually been planted when they were much smaller. It has also been listed that the causes of passive aggressiveness commonly falls into three groups in organizations:

- Unclear Scope of Authority: Misunderstandings and misrepresentations concerning who really has control over which decisions are often the first signs that an organization is confronting passive-aggressive state gradually in the end. Therefore, weakened divisional managers who are already unclear about the boundaries of their own authority, and fearful of losing what is left of it, come to take little personal responsibility for the success of the organization.
- Misleading Goals: It's clear that effective goal setting and management has an enormous effect on the success of employees and the organization as a whole. Good goals can go bad because of misleading and when goals aren't clear or the employees and they are not acknowledged or shared well for the responsible individuals in organizations often lead to passive aggressiveness.
- Agreement Without Cooperation: Passive-aggressive organizations are often the sum of a series of ad impromptu plans and decisions or events that made sense in the moment but have the effect of gradually blurring decision rights regardless of how they arrived where they are and over time such hoc arrangements outlive their individual rationales, and the organization loses all vestiges of a coherent overall plan.

3. CONCLUSION

This study provides an in-depth description of the passive-aggression and passive-aggressive employees at workplaces. First, aggressive anger may take the forms of yelling, threat, physical blow, breaking or destroying something that are observable. But passive-aggression is so subtle and covert that it takes time for the victim to estimate whether it's really aggression or not. And, since passive aggression is cloaked and disguised, it can be very late for the victim to defend himself or herself against it. Second, passive-aggressive are the real masters of manipulating others and it can be very toxic to relationships and group of people at workplaces. As they are fully motivated by hidden intend to hurt, annoy or defeat the victims, they engage in manipulative behaviors, they block resolution by lying or deliberately undermining team projects, misplacing the documents, chronic tardiness and absenteeism or stalling the tasks in the organization.

Passive-aggression is so common in the organizations and it's really hard to spot aggressive-behaviors in the meantime to avoid or stop them. Since passive-aggressive behavior is more comfortable to deliver than confrontational behavior, passive-aggressive employees keep on engaging passive-aggressive behaviors in order to achieve their goals. But passive-aggressive behaviors may have disastrous consequences and hidden costs for the organizations such as employee burn out or higher employee turnover in the end. So here are some recommendations for overcoming, the perfect office crime, passive-aggressive behaviors and passive-aggressive employees' negative effects at workplaces:

- First and the most important thing is you should spot the passive-aggressive employees in the organization. The act of putting off the work to be done intentionally, procrastination, acting behind the scenes to obstruct, delay, postpone, and undermine the successes of others are the most significant behaviors that passive aggressive employees often adopt in the organizations. In order to overcome such unwanted behaviors at workplace, the management must set and inform expectations, limits, and deadlines in advance, at the beginning of any task or project in the organization. The details about the task should be defined well to the passive-aggressive employee and it must be told him/her before the duty that excuses such as "I didn't know it", "How come you have expected to finish the work in such very limited time" or "I have completely forgotten about it/that" won't be accepted.
- The second important thing is since passive-aggressive employees intend to hide their real feelings, anger and reflect untrue ones, they usually prefer to communicate indirectly and they often choose to use electronic communication, social media, e-mails because face-to-face, communicating directly causes them discomfort. Thus, managers or supervisors should prefer to communicate with them face-to-face in the offices and less via e-mails or on the phone in order to understand their real feelings well through their body language. As passive-aggressive employees are very uncomfortable with direct confrontation and once they find out that you are not abstain to deal with the situations directly, he/she will possibly avoid engaging you in future passive-aggressive behaviors.
- It's usually very important and enjoyable for the passive-aggressive employees to embarrass others and getting under coworkers' skin makes them feel good and they often think that the balance of power is certainly shifted in their favor in the organization. So revealing your frustration bluntly like angry tones of voice or aggressive body language make them happier and they might think that they have attained their aim successfully. Instead, staying frosty to overcome passive-aggressive behaviors is very important in order not to feel them victorious. Trying to remain calm is the key because if you meet their underlying hostility,

you're playing into exactly what they desire. Besides, when confronting their abusive behaviors or false excuses, keep silent first, stay calm and you can respond to them with unemotional comments and expressions, a backhanded compliment, fact-based statistical information or biting jokes so he/she will seek to avoid unwanted behaviors in the future. It must be remembered that a quick or blunt response to passive-aggressive behaviors will lower your guard in front of your co-workers.

- It's obvious that the behaviors of a passive-aggressive employee are complex and their behavioral patterns are often deeply rooted and a kind of coping with stress, anxieties and insecurities. So understanding what's driving their behavior is essential for overcoming passive-aggressive behaviors at workplace. Observing and taking notes of specific examples of unacceptable behaviors at workplace in the nick of time might be useful to define the passive-aggressive behavior and looking into the roots of that behavior might be easier. Documenting exactly what the passive-aggressive employee is doing and defining why it is not acceptable would be useful for spotting the matter correctly in the organization. Then, talking with the perpetrator and sharing the specific facts and examples you have documented at that time would be sensible and declaring and warning that such negative behavior will not be tolerated can be intimidating for the passive-aggressive employee for not to behave like that. In sum, keeping everything documented might be effective to protect yourself and the company.

- Due to their nature, passive-aggressive behaviors might not show their real faces until they actually are so passive-aggressive deviance can be damaging to the organization and, organizational culture or its employees so it is important to understand its initial causes well. First, since passive-aggressive individuals may lead a toxic environment, so it's essential to define indirect communication head-on and confronting a passive-aggressive person with the facts and identifying the behavior that has been observed and discussed why it is problematic is vital. Second, being a role model open and honest communication in organization is important because showing that you want to listen to feedback and being careful to avoid punishing employees who disagree with you openly would be good because doing so will only encourage more employees to take the passive-aggressive route in the organization. To sum up, evaluating periodically the culture of the organization and taking steps to ensure that one or two passive-aggressive employees aren't having a negative effect on the entire organization will make your expectations for your employees clear and stay consistent.

One must bear in mind that you can't change a passive-aggressive employee completely but taking effective precautions might prevent unproductive behaviors that passive-aggressive employees caused and decrease the unrest in the organization.

4. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest between the authors. (Single Author)

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6. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CB described one of the most important challenges in organizations, the passive-aggression which hasn't been mentioned much in business management literature recently. The passive-aggressive individuals have been focused on and described through theoretical projection and a conceptual framework has been formed by gathering specific descriptions about them and their typical work behaviors in

organization. Then, CB has made recommendations in order to reduce negative effects of passive-aggressive employees at workplaces.

7. ETHICS COMMITTEE STATEMENT AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY COPYRIGHTS

Since it's a conceptual research study, it doesn't include a quantitative analysis that requires any information obtaining method like conducting survey so ethics committee principles haven't been complied with in the study but intellectual property and copyright principles have been taken care at most level in the article.

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