

• *Retired on the Job*—Characteristics: They're open about not being motivated to change or improve. Strategies: Say you understand their situation but state your expectations about the work required; follow up with classroom visits.

• *Resident Experts*—Characteristics: They broadcast their knowledge about every issue. When they make mistakes, they blame others or outside circumstances, and they make excuses when you want to observe them implementing new ideas or techniques. Strategies: Privately ask them specific questions to assess their knowledge; hold them accountable when they make errors; and confront the behavior one-on-one.

• *Unelected Representatives*—Characteristics: They claim to represent a group or viewpoint without others' permission. Strategies: Ask the colleagues they claim to represent if they are in agreement; conduct open conversations about the issues in which everyone has a chance to speak.

• *Whiners and complainers*—Characteristics: They find fault with everything, fail to take responsibility for issues in their classrooms or professional practice, and go overboard in talking about issues and problems. Strategies: Hold pro-and-con conversations in which positive ideas as well as concerns are aired; confront in a difficult conversation; don't accept irrational explanations; ask them to reframe the situation and reduce the melodrama.

"Working Productively with Difficult and Resistant Staff" by John Eller and Sheila Eller in *Principal*, September/October 2012 (Vol. 92, #1, pp. 28-31), summarized in Marshall Memo 453.

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Dealing with Colleagues Who Undermine the Mission

In this *Education Week* article, Corey Mitchell reports on veteran administrators' experience with colleagues who undermine and disrupt a school's mission. "On the surface, perhaps some of these troublemakers don't seem like the most horrible things in the world," says Virginia leader Diane Watkins. "But because they slowly erode the morale of your building, they can be." John Eller (St. Cloud State University) has catalogued some common problem behaviors and tactics.

- *Justifying actions based on the way things were done before* ("The last principal didn't have a problem with that." – Response: Reaffirm that you are a different principal with different expectations.
- *Oblivious about how the behavior affects others* – Response: Provide clear feedback to help the person understand the impact.

- *Denying, refuses to acknowledge the problem* – Response: Directly address the problematic behavior, leaving no room for misinterpretation.
- *Blaming others* – Response: Steer the conversation toward problem-solving.
- *Stalling, hoping to last you out* – Response: Make it clear that you want to solve the problem for the good of the staff and students.
- *Making excuses, spending more time justifying and rationalizing than it would take to change the behavior* – Response: Avoid getting pulled down that rabbit hole. Discuss how this response doesn't further your long-range goals.
- *Recruiting colleagues, parents, or community members to resist initiatives* – Response: Clarify with colleagues what you want to change and why, and while input is appreciated, you are the captain of the ship.
- *Passive-aggressive undermining by not completing assignments or giving 100 percent* – Response: Make sure people assigned to a task have appropriate training and a clear idea of what is intended.

A common mistake, says former principal Todd Whitaker, is ignoring troubling behaviors in hopes that they, or the perpetrators, will go away. Another mistake is addressing the whole staff rather than talking with the malefactor face-to-face. "Dealing with negative people is never easy," he says. "It's never fun. But if you don't do it, nothing about your job is fun."

Four additional pieces of advice from Mitchell's interviewees: address problems early rather than letting them fester; use a light touch at first, increasing the odds of a no-big-deal change in behavior; during difficult conversations, make it about the behavior, not the person; and listen to the other person's perspective because there may be something you're missing.

A proactive strategy, veteran principals told Mitchell, is to be in classrooms every day, complimenting effective practices and building relationships and rapport with colleagues. That way, when difficult conversations become necessary, they've been preceded by others that are more positive.

"Unfortunately," says Watkins, "sometimes the most difficult person in the building is the principal." Whitaker adds that an insensitive and ineffective leader can corrupt an entire school. One way to tune in on one's own shortcomings is conducting a regular staff survey and looking objectively at critical feedback.

"How Principals Can Banish Toxic Adult Behavior from Their Schools" by Corey Mitchell in *Education Week*, October 17, 2018 (Vol. 38, #9, pp. 18–20), summarized in Marshall Memo 759.
