

Bad apples spoil the business barrel

James sat across from me, with his arms crossed and one eyebrow raised as I spoke. "Work with me here," I said. "Is it possible that there is any grain of truth to the perception that your anger is sometimes vented inappropriately?"

I could see from the look on his face that I was in danger of becoming his next victim, but he shook his head. "Absolutely not!" he asserted angrily. "That guy that complained about me is just a wimp. Besides, it's my job to keep the people on this project in line!"

I was brought in to "fix" James after many management hours had been spent at his company dealing with complaints about him. Several attempts had been made to correct his behaviour. He was a classic "bad apple" - an employee, in this case a project leader, who had a miserable temperament that was adversely affecting

the performance and morale of other people.

Every organization has at least one bad apple, according to Joanne G. Sujansky, PhD, CSP, founder and president of KEYGroup. She warns that if you want to keep him/her from spoiling the whole barrel, you've got your work cut out for you. She cites a recent study conducted by William Felps, a doctoral student at the University of Washington Business School, and Terrence Mitchell, a professor of management and organization at the UW Business School and a UW psychology professor, and published in Research in Organizational Behaviour that explores just how much damage one bad apple can wreak.

Felps and Mitchell define bad apples as those who don't do their fair share of the work, who are chronically unhappy and

emotionally unstable, or who bully or attack others. They found that a single "toxic" or negative team member can be the catalyst for downward spirals in organizations. "This study takes an interesting look at a problem that is all too prevalent in corporate (North) America," says Sujansky. "The authors point out that it's likely that your bad apples are harming your other employees' morale, which can lead to an overall team breakdown. When bad apples are present, people aren't as willing to handle problems that arise, don't foster open communication with one another, and generally stop functioning as a team - not a great recipe for high performance and productivity."

James is just one of many bad apples that I have coached over the years. In my experience bad apples can be male or female and can come from any cultural background. But here is what all bad apples have in common. They have:

- A manner of interacting with colleagues that intimidates, scares or annoys them.
 - An inability, or unwillingness, to see their behaviour as a problem.
 - A belief that their behaviour is somehow necessary or right.
 - A self perception that they are victims of either management or the complainers.
 - Low self esteem, often disguised as arrogance
- Since we all have bad apples in our organizations, and we know how destructive they can be, why aren't we better at doing something about them?
- As Sujansky points out, dealing with bad apples is no easy task. After all, managers are only human and bad apples have a tendency to be just as draining for their managers as they are for everyone else in the company. And some bad apples can actually be excellent performers despite their behaviour towards others. So what do we do with them?

Although there is no panacea for dealing with bad apples, here are some of my ideas:

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- Hire carefully. Examine candidates' qualities and characteristics, not just their skills.
- Develop and enforce a code of conduct, guiding principles etc. to define appropriate employee behaviour.
- Measure employees' performance against the above standards. Remember the adage: "What gets measured gets done." Reward or correct the behaviour.
- Deal with problem behaviour swiftly - do not ignore it or delay action.
- Find the bad apple's motivation for change. Most people want to keep their jobs or get along better with others.
- Hire a professional to conduct a survey that will provide anonymous evidence to a bad apple of his / her need to change.
- Provide a coach to the bad apple but only if s/he is otherwise worth keeping.
- If the bad behaviour persists and is poisoning others, call an employment lawyer to discuss termination. You'll enjoy the difference once this person is gone.

How about you, are you a bad apple? If you are, you probably don't know it. Most of us have a blind spot when it comes to understanding how others perceive us. Almost every bad apple I have coached needed evidence and convincing to realize how their behaviour was affecting others.

As for James, I conducted a survey of his colleagues who pointed out that he was neither trusted nor respected. The feedback hurt him but it motivated him to make some changes because he wanted to keep his job. He was later promoted to manager and guess what? He is now trying to manage an employee in his department that's a bad apple. What goes around comes around.

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As part of this program, BD has provided CVH with an educational grant to further advance their efforts to provide a safer work environment for their healthcare workers.