Measures to stop the rot

How do you recognise and deal with a bad apple? Nicola Davies looks at how to keep a team together

Most professionals have experienced a ‘bad apple’ in the team, someone who fails to pull their weight, is aggressive or bullying, frequently pessimistic and violates team norms.

Not to be mistaken for the creative or unconventional thinker, the bad apple has a much more devastating effect on a team, causing extensive disharmony.

Failing to make enough effort can cause feelings of inequality among other team members, while frequent negativity can lead to poor team morale. Violations of team norms undermine trust.

Team disharmony
As trust weakens, so does the positive team culture, with members physically and psychologically disengaging. This harms the team, its individual members and the team’s outcomes. In nursing, team outcomes include patient care and the consequences of a bad apple can be serious.

Given the devastating consequences of a bad apple, being able to identify one can prevent the entire barrel being spoiled (see box below). In terms of coping, team members can react in one of three ways:

• Motivational intervention: members express concerns and ask the person to change.
• Rejection: removal of the bad apple.
• Defence: this can include denial, social withdrawal, anger and anxiety.

Attempting to motivate the negative person is usually the most successful strategy, while defence tends to be a destructive method of coping. Other coping techniques you may wish to consider include:

• Informing your manager before the problem gets out of hand. Managers should speak to the individual privately.
• When challenging a bad apple, starting with a positive statement to avoid evoking immediate defensiveness.
• Determining any underlying causes for the person’s negativity, such as a need for training or a mentor, or other forms of support.
• Using staff appraisals to monitor team dynamics.

Keep the positive aspects of the team in sight. Other members need to continue to praise each other’s efforts in an attempt to strengthen those areas that are being overshadowed by a negative team member.
Ideally, a bad apple will be identified before they are employed. Indeed, managers need to take special care when recruiting staff or forming teams. This might include pre-recruitment tests to screen out individuals who are less agreeable or conscientious.

If negative individuals emerge in an established team, allocating them with independent work can be a solution. In any event, the effectiveness of the team and its members is the priority.

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### Identifying a bad apple

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<th>Type of bad apple</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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| **Negative employee** | Rarely smiles  
                          Makes negative remarks  
                          Resists new procedures  
                          Frequently complains  
                          Predicts failure  
                          Disagreeable and blameful  
                          Sees challenges as obstacles |
| **Underperformer**  | Lacks desire  
                          Does the bare minimum  
                          Acts busy when not  
                          Chooses unnecessary tasks over critical tasks  
                          Leaves least favourite tasks for others  
                          Inflexible  
                          No sense of urgency |
| **Conflict creator** | Thrives on conflict  
                          Leaves others feeling anxious, angry, intimidated, resentful and poorly motivated  
                          Intensifies problems  
                          Challenges decisions  
                          Makes accusations  
                          Territorial |