

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON PASSIVE – AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR AT WORKPLACE

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Abstract: *The current study focuses on the characterization and perception of passive – aggressive behavior at workplace. We interviewed 12 employees, who work in large companies in Bihor county, on the position of base and middle-level managers. Three of the themes that emerged from the analyzed interviews, have a particular importance in the workplace. First, majority of the participants claimed that the PA behavior is present in their organizations and there is a tendency to spread throughout the organization. Second, most participants viewed the PA behaviour as being tolerated in their organizations. Third, most interviewees claimed that the PA behaviour has negative effects in the organization. The PA behaviour was deeply analysed by many researchers over the time and it has a wide variety of definitions. We could summarily define the concept as including behaviors that convey aggressive feelings through passive means. One of the dark side is that these passive means could be confusing many times. While other forms of aggression like mobbing, bullying, bossing appear as evident, the PA behavior could be misinterpreted. This destructive behaviour could initially appear at several members and then quickly spread throughout all the organisation. This way, the company could become a toxic environment where the valuable employees do not want to remain anymore. The PA behavior must be discovered in good time and stopped, before to penetrate the whole organization. The three main themes emerged from the analyzed interviews led us to interesting discussions and conclusions. We pointed out the main possible ways to prevent and stop the occurrence and spreading of the PA behavior, taking into account the causes of this type of behavior. We also outlined several ways to deal with PA behavior at workplace.*

Keywords: *passive–aggressive behavior; workplace; negative effects; destructive; aggressive feelings; passive means.*

JEL Classification: *M10; M12; M14.*

1. Introduction

Passive – aggressive behavior was first used clinically in the World War II to describe soldiers who refused to comply with officers' demands. (Millon, 1981) The concept has been in the spotlight of clinical theory since then for nearly a century and clinical theorists continue to value the concept. The psychiatrists and theorists from other fields have been variously explained the concept. However there are three widely accepted theories conceptualized in: the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) categorical construct,

Millon and Davis's (1996) multidimensional traits, and McCrae and Costa's (1987) five-factor taxonomic trait model.

First, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* requires that „a person with PA (negativistic) personality disorder exhibit four or more of the following seven criteria beginning in early adulthood and in a variety of contexts (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, pp. 734-735):

1. passively resists fulfilling routine social and occupational tasks;
2. complains of being misunderstood and unappreciated by others;
3. is sullen and argumentative;
4. unreasonably criticizes and scorns authority;
5. expresses envy and resentment toward those apparently more fortunate;
6. voices exaggerated and persistent complaints of personal misfortune; and
7. alternates between hostile defiance and contrition”.

Second, Millon and Davis (1996) proposed that their negativistic descriptor is broader, encompassing the “total pattern” (Millon, Davis, Millon, Escovar, & Meagher, 2000, p. 472). They specified four types of negativists: „vacillating (which adds borderline components to PA behavior), discontented (which adds depressive components to PA behavior), abrasive (which adds sadistic components to PA behavior), and circuitous (which adds passive-dependent components to PA behavior)”.

Third, the five-factor model has assumed many forms since its inception in 1932 by McDougall and its subsequent validating factor analysis by Thurstone (Digman, 2002, p. 17). By 1994, Costa and Widiger characterized the current five factors (or dimensions) „as extraversion or surgency, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability or neuroticism, and openness to experience or intellect” (Digman, 2002).

We did not focus on the personality disorder, but on PA behavior at workplace that could be shortly defined (Johnson N. J., Klee T., 2007) as the behavior „that convey aggressive feelings through passive means”.

We defined the organizational passiveaggressiveness by describing a passive-aggressive person as being someone who:

- apparently is agreeable and supportive, but behind the scene they turn their back and sabotage
- claims that you can trust them, but their actions show the contrary
- makes promises that remain only promises
- blames “out of their control” things for not complying with their promises
- agrees with you to your face, but behind your back disagree or even sabotage things
- places blame on someone else rather than admitting their own lack of support for a certain matter
- gives you a positive feedback directly, but then a negative one to coworkers and management
- gathers important information from other employees in order them to appear more powerful compare to others around them
- makes fun of someone around them pretending they were just kidding

- refuses to express their true feelings, wants everyone to believe that they are big supporters

2. Why the workplace is a perfect place for passive-aggressive behavior?

Here are the reasons why the workplace is the perfect place for passive – aggressive behavior:

- Most of the adults spend more time at work than anyplace else. Even if mathematically, the adults could spend more time at home, much of their time is spent mostly sleeping. Passive-aggressive behavior could appear wherever a person spends a lot of time; so, this behavior is more likely to appear where the adults spend more time than anyplace else, in other words, at work.
- An employee usually does not work alone, but mostly in a team. The team is the place where inevitably the relationships appear. In these relationships passive-aggression behavior can occur.
- The individuals have personal emotions that must be expressed. In a formal workplace with a professional atmosphere is more difficult for the employees to express them; consequently, PA behavior is more likely to appear where is no place for heartfelt and personal emotions.
- Some employees feel that their boss insult them by treating or speaking of them without proper respect or attention, but they do not have the courage to tell the boss how they really feel; they consider would risk their career being sincere. So, the employees must be very careful when they choose their words. A place where an employee cannot be sincere, direct, honest, is an ideal place for passive aggression.
- A child who has no chance to express the anger in the childhood, will probably seek to express it later on, when he/she must comply with an hierarchy. A passive aggressive employee will see the boss or other persons around him/her as being the abusive adult from their childhood and will act consequently.
- Electronic communication encourages a passive aggressive behavior; it is easier for an employee to transmit passive aggressive messages electronically than face-to-face; in addition, the initial message can be altered or lost.
- In a teamwork the employees work together, many times the accountability do not go till every single employee. A passive aggressive team member can sabotage the entire work without being found guilty.
- Human resources policies make dismissal difficult many times. They are designed to protect the employees, they do not take deeply into account the passive aggressive behavior. When confronted, a passive aggressive employee is always ready to find explanations for his/her behavior, even put himself/herself in a role of victim. However he/she meets the minimum standards making the dismissal quite difficult.

3. Research Methodology

Participants

10 base and middle-level managers, working in large companies in Bihor county were initially contacted by telephone. 7 out of 10 agreed to the interview process. At the end of each interview, the interviewees were asked if they could recommend similarly qualified and potentially interested persons for the same interview. This way, another 5 persons joined the group. So, using the snowball sampling technique we obtained a group of 12 persons who was interviewed.

Instrument

The qualitative study was performed conducting individual interviews using semi-structured questions with each consenting participant. The interviews were face-to-face, ranging from 45 to 60 minutes in length. All interviews used the same 10 questions. Firstly, the participants received a handout containing our description of a passive aggressive behavior (presentated in the last part of the introduction), then they received step by step the questions listed below.

1. Do you agree with the perception of passive-aggressive behavior described in the manual? How would you alter the description of a passive aggressive person?
2. Have you witnessed, experienced, or worked with passive-aggressive behavior in your workplace? Could you describe your experience using examples?
3. Were your experience with passive-aggressive behavior negligible, moderate or significant?
4. Do you believe that the pasive aggressive behavior could spread in the organisation? Could the entire organization be dominated by the passive aggressive behavior?
5. Is this type of behavior tolerated in the organization? If yes, could you tell us why?
6. What are the effects of passive-aggressive behavior at work and how it is reflected in the recipients' behavior? Do you consider them positive or negative? Do you have some examples?
7. Do you consider there are effects of passive-aggressive behavior to the perpetrator? If "yes", are they positive or negative? Could you give us examples?
8. What are, in your opinion, the main causes of passive-aggressive behavior at work? Could you explain us how have you came to this conclusion?
9. Could you suggest some ways to stop the occurrence and spreading of passive aggressive behavior?
10. What is your opinion regarding the way the company must deal with passive aggressive behavior at work?

After the interviews, there was a debriefing session. We sent copies of the transcribed interviews to each participant and asked for their feedback.

Data analyses

The data were analyzed in five steps. The first step consisted in reading of the transcribed interviews a few times in order the researcher to have an overall view. Each participant has received a number that was used further on in analyses instead of the name. The second step was identifying the key responses for each question.

The third step involved creating a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for each questions. The participants' numbers were entered vertically and the key responses, horizontally. The fourth step was the identifying of the emergent themes. For this purpose we counted the situations when the respondents had the same answer. When 7 out of 12 respondents had the same opinion related to a certain theme, we called that theme an emergent one. The fifth step supposed sending the themes results to the participants and asking for changes if necessary, but no change was necessary.

4. Results

Participants in this research are base or middle - level managers. They all claimed they have had experience either moderate or significant with passive-aggressive behavior both at their previous workplaces and the current job. The majority of the participants claimed that the PA behavior has the tendency to spread throughout organization, being possible even to dominate the entire organization.

The passive aggressive behavior is tolerated in the most of the organization, sometimes even encouraged. In this situation, it is normal for the other employees to copy an appreciated behavior. Passive aggressive behavior could spread in the entire organization and has a destructive effect on it.

Passive aggressive behavior has a negative effect on the organization, this behavior *impacting the ability to accomplish tasks and achieve* goals. It also has negative effects on staff morale. The work environment becomes a toxic one; the valuable employees become depressed and want to escape from this toxic environment, looking for employment opportunities elsewhere. The effects on the perpetrators could be positive, as long as they are not only tolerated, but rewarded, as a consequence of their behavior.

5. Discussions

The passive aggressive behavior occurs as a consequence of both exogenous and endogenous factors, as we discussed in part 2 of this paper, endogenous factors making the workplace a perfect place for passive-aggressive behavior. In addition, some changes also contribute to passive-aggressive responses in the workplace; the changes could refer to:

- the number of women in the workplace;
- the position of women in the workplace;
- the number of employees;
- the number of workers in the workplace;
- the communication styles;
- the type of organizational structure (formal or informal);

No matter the causes are, the passive aggressive behavior must be stopped before spreading throughout the organization. Here are some ways to stop PA behaviour:

- Respond determined, and trust your own feelings
- Communicate that the messages you receive are confusing in your opinion

- Ask questions about what really their behavior means
- Notice the difference between what they do and what they say
- Pay attention to the results, not to the promises.
- Maintain a positive view
- Show that you are steady and aware of the meaning of the message
- If you disagree, politely dismiss their suggestions underlining that it is normal to disagree sometimes.

However, once it is present into an organization ways must be found to deal with it.

Here are a few suggestions:

- Check if an "yes" answer means always "yes"! The passive aggressive persons say "yes" even when they mean "no"
- Use face-to-face communication instead of indirect communication! There are times when short notes are acceptable, but not always!
- Confront a passive-aggressive person with the facts! He /she must know that you understand what is happening.
- Transmit to the passive-aggressive colleague the fact that you have observed his/her behavior and discuss why it is problematic
- Encourage your subordinates to give you a feedback! Give the employees the opportunity to express their opinions!
- Do not punish the employees who disagree with you, because you will encourage the subordinates to become passive-aggressive persons.
- Make sure that the employees clearly understood your expectations! An ambiguous message leaves room for an aggressive passive behavior.
- Be consistent! Do not easily change your mind!
- Evaluate the culture of your organization from time to time and make sure that one or two passive-aggressive employees do not negatively influence other employees, or even the entire organization.
- Eliminate the persons having a passive-aggressive behavior! This way you send the message that this behavior will not be tolerated in your organization.
- Make place for integrity, honesty, loyalty, and respect, in your organization! The culture you work in must a culture you can be proud of.

6. Conclusions

The aspect we theoretically and practically analyzed in this paper is a negative one and it has critical consequences on both the organization and recipients.

The preponderance of participant-expressed views held that passive-aggressive behavior is present in their organizations. However, we came to the conclusion that generally, the organization is the perfect place for this behavior to occur. The organization is the place where the actions provoke reactions encouraging the spreading of this behavior throughout the organization.

The participants also held that this behavior is often tolerated and the perpetrators even rewarded. We underline that it must be discovered in good time and the organization must be preoccupied in finding ways to stop it; under no circumstances

should this behavior be tolerated, but it could be. Unfortunately, this thing happens quite often. The managers are many times busy and far from the reality or the executives are passive-aggressive and what they report are different from reality. In this situation, the managers must carefully observe the actions of the people reporting to them and allow all the employees to share their possible worries without any fear of reprisal.

Related to this issue, the respondents claimed that sometimes this behavior is not discovered and discouraged, but reworded, so that it has positive effects on the perpetrator. However, they all claimed that the effects of this dishonest behavior is negative and it could destroy the entire organization.

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