



BY JEFF JOINER

Put Down the



Whistle

Wouldn't it be nice if the most frustrating challenges that you faced each day were related to an area in which you have specific training and expertise, like...say...food and nutrition? Unfortunately, you—and many of your peers across the country—probably find that your biggest headaches, problems and hassles are not caused by your menu, but by people. And not just any people, but members of your own school nutrition team.

While *most* of the professionals working in America's school cafeterias and kitchens are hard workers who love what they do, even in this industry, we encounter the proverbial "bad apples." I would hazard a guess that at one point or another, each one of us has worked with individuals who have not learned how to do their jobs without complaining, slacking and/or stirring up trouble. Supervising such negative employees can be, at best, a recurring headache and, at worst, a demoralizing chore.

Fortunately, there are some proven techniques to manage and interact with difficult employees in such a way that it can lead to a more productive, efficient and happier workplace. Let's start by exploring some common personnel challenges and identify effective strategies for handling these.

Top Troublemakers

The best part of the school nutrition profession is that we *get to* work with people. The worst part is that we *have to* work with people. And, whenever we work with people, certain types of challenges are bound to turn up. Let's look at three of the most common—and potentially most destructive—to building and maintaining a cohesive team.

Disputes Among Team Members. For most managers, this is the part of the job that makes you feel like a referee, and it's probably not an area in which you've had much, if any, training. The secret to dealing with feuding employees is to head off any clashes *before* they happen. You do this by simply making "cooperation" a mandatory skill and job responsibility in your department.

You can do this in formal and informal ways. If you have the proper authority, you should immediately amend the materials you give to job applicants and new hires. Add "cooperation" as one of the requirements for working in your operation, and establish "the inability to cooperate with coworkers" among the grounds for termination.

Even if you don't have the authority to mandate such creativity, managers at all levels can make an effort to repeatedly emphasize the importance of cooperation. For example, you can make it an agenda item at all of your meetings and inservice trainings. Praise your most cooperative individuals in front of the entire team. Make it a discussion point in any kind of performance evaluation. Create an award for your end-of-the-year banquet.



SNAPSHOT

- Bad attitudes are at the heart of most personnel performance issues.
- You can establish that cooperation in the workplace is a job requirement.
- Stay alert to how your own behaviors might influence your team's performance.

How can **YOU** handle problems with difficult employees so that **everybody** wins?

Over time, you *can* create a culture of teamwork. Until then, however, you may have to mediate some disputes. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that if you ignore a big dispute between individuals on your team that it will get better by itself. It probably won't. I'm not a believer in the idea that "time heals all wounds." In my experience, ignoring wounds is a good way to get an infection! Wounds need to be cleaned, disinfected and treated. You do that by first having *individual* conversations with the people involved, followed by a joint meeting to discuss your expectations of future behavior. Make sure that these team members understand that if the situation doesn't improve, there *will* be consequences.

This is a serious topic, and you are the supervisor, the one responsible for resolving this problem, no matter how uncomfortable confrontation may feel to you. That said, your conversations can and should be thoughtful, empathetic (while still being objective) and demonstrate good listening skills on your part. And, keep in mind that you can catch some flies with a little honey. For example, it can be helpful to point out to the individuals in conflict that they have important



jobs. This is no ordinary workplace—we are nourishing kids! When school nutrition employees are reminded of the important work that they are engaged in, it sometimes can have the power to put the conflict into proper perspective.

Slackers. Slackers, shirkers, loafers, lazybones—whatever you want to call them, you know these experts who do whatever they can to avoid work. They come up with great excuses for never getting anything done, and they are extraordinarily adept at arguing their way out of whatever you have asked them to do. Their behavior hurts your team more than you could imagine. A study conducted by management consulting firm Leadership IQ found that 87% of employees said working beside a low-performing colleague had made them want to change jobs, and 93% claimed that working with low performers decreased their own productivity.

Who do you think the slackers are driving off your team? It's your top performers, who are going to go find somewhere else to work. So, you must take steps to nip the slacking in the bud. Be on the look-out for it. Document it.



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Don't tolerate it. Check with your supervisor or human resources department about the steps you should take for formal warnings and disciplinary actions when an employee fails to perform to proper job standards and responsibilities.

Bad Attitudes. We've all worked with people whose attitude just plain stinks. You know them: They are quick to find something wrong with every rule, every policy and everyone. They can be easily identified by their exasperated sighs and rolling eyes. And like slackers, they can erode the morale of the entire team.

While the signs of an attitude problem tend to be obvious, they are hard to document and are easily denied. The best way to deal with an individual who is projecting a bad attitude is to have a conversation in private. Tell her how you perceive her actions and how they make you feel. Be specific, and ask for her help in solving the perception problem.

Such conversations won't always result in a turnaround, but at least you've started a dialogue about the impact that bad (and good) attitudes can have on teamwork. The best-

case scenario is that it could lead to a productive conversation resulting in real change. If not, do what you can to document specific incidents (especially of disrespect, defiance or insubordination), and contact your own supervisor or human resource department for advice.

Are You Making Things Worse?

One of the most difficult things to recognize is your own potential culpability in fostering an environment that produces difficult employees. Sometimes, managers and directors inadvertently behave in ways that aggravate the problem. In your efforts to get better results with the people on your team, you would be wise to examine your own behaviors, as well.

A Lack of Clear Goals. Many of the school nutrition operations that I have worked with have a mission statement that is intended to guide the work of the entire team. It might be something like, *"To provide wholesome, high-quality, nutritious meals served in an efficient, friendly manner."* Sounds great, doesn't it? It is great. But it's an aspiration,

not a definable, quantifiable goal. How would you know if your team actually lived up to its mission? What are the objective standards that define "wholesome" and "high-quality," as well as "efficient" and "friendly"?

More important, how do your team members know if they are truly achieving the mission? Mission statements are important—but since they only provide the *vision*, without *direction*,

an effective team needs more. And it's your job as the manager or director to set reasonable, clear goals for their performance.

The best goals are SMART: Specific, Motivational, Attainable, Realistic and Trackable. Examples of SMART goals would be: *"Increase your lunch participation by 10% by the end of the year,"* or *"Decrease wasted product by 25% by 2013."* If your team isn't working toward a specific, measurable goal, you are much more likely to have problems. Remember, people rowing the boat don't have time to rock the boat!

A Lack of Fairness. Research done by HR.com, an online community of human resource executives, found that 6 out of 10 employees believe their company is doing a poor job of applying personnel policies and procedures fairly. When employees feel they are not being treated fairly, they lose respect for management, build up resentment and lose motivation for their work.

Of course, defining "fair" is the tricky part. Being fair



does not mean treating every member of the team exactly the same. Everyone has different areas of responsibility, work styles and performance levels.

As a supervisor, you actually need to strive for both consistency *and* fairness, which are not the same thing. Consistency is conformity to existing standards. Fairness involves factors you can't always predict or control, such as circumstances, conditions and performance. Consistency is easy—all it requires is good record-keeping. Fairness, however, is harder, because it requires one to exercise good judgment and treat people *appropriately*, based on the situation. In a word, fairness takes *wisdom*, and that is never simple or easy.

A Track Record of “Wimping Out.” Most people don't like confrontation and for good reason: Confronting an employee is one of the least enjoyable parts of the job! That's why it can be tempting to “let it go this time,” give *another* warning or just avoid the difficult conversation. But when you wimp out, you are doing a disservice to yourself, your team and your district. Indeed, shying away from confrontation is one of the easiest and quickest ways for others to take advantage of you.

You were put in a leadership position for a reason. It's time to have confidence in yourself and do your job. Don't waste time second-guessing every word you said in every conversation. Be strong, be fair, be honest, and things usually will work out in the end.

Low Expectations. One of the things I like best about the school nutrition profession is the typically long tenure of those who work in this field. I have worked with many directors and managers who have been doing their job for 20+ years! The result is an industry full of highly experienced, highly skilled people.

But there is a potential downside to all that experience. The longer you have done your job, the more you have been lied to, taken advantage of and disappointed by individuals on your team. If you are not careful, you may find yourself slowly lowering your expectations of your staff over time. And that can become a serious problem.

Nothing extraordinary has ever been accomplished by a leader with low expectations. Force yourself to expect the very best from every person and every situation. You may

be surprised by how many people actually live up to those expectations. It has been my experience that, in life, you sometimes get what you want, but you almost always get what you expect. So, expect the best!

Your Negative Attitude. Be honest with yourself: Do you spend more time telling your employees what they are doing wrong or complimenting them on what they are doing right? I know, I know—part of your job should be to coach, correct and fix what isn't working. But there is a thin line between correcting and criticizing.

If all you do is criticize members of your team, they are going to resent you and your opinion (if not actually hate the sight of you). Rebellion is an understandable reaction to such an environment. So, check your own attitude. Choose to be positive. You can still do your job—and fix what needs fixing—while praising what is going well. If there is any area where you want to model a good example for your team, it's having a positive attitude.

When Nothing Else Works

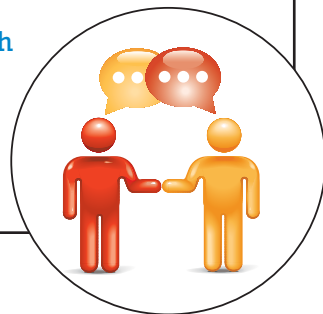
Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, a particular employee on your team just might not work out—and something has to be done to resolve a bad situation. There are two approaches you can consider.

Grant a “Decision-Making Leave.” This is a last-ditch effort to turn things around with an employee. Here's how it works: Have a meeting with the employee who is under-performing. Tell her you are giving her the next day off, with pay, to use as “decision-making leave.” Ask that she spend the day reflecting on her commitment to your operation and to make a decision: Does she want to *resign* or *re-engage*?

If the staff person decides this is not the job for her and she can't be happy working for you, you will part ways with significantly fewer hard feelings than if her employment was terminated outright. However, if she decides that she wants to keep her job and re-engage, it is with the understanding that a significant behavior change will be required upon her return. Make sure she knows that this is a one-time offer. Indeed, a decision-making leave is a *once-in-a-career* opportunity. If your goal is to achieve a true employee turnaround, this is one of the most effective ways to do it.



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Be Prepared to Cut Your Losses. Unless you are a real jerk (and I assume that, if you are reading this article, you are not), terminating an employee is the very least favorite of your responsibilities. But there are times when it is the most prudent action.

According to research conducted by Gallup, 29% of America's employees are "engaged" in their job, meaning they believe in what they do, feel commitment toward the organization and are willing to expend their best efforts to make the organization successful. In comparison, 54% are considered "unengaged," meaning that they show up for work and go through the motions. The dangerous group is the 17% who are "disengaged." These people don't like their jobs, and are actively engaged in behavior that is counterproductive to their organization's goals. You simply cannot afford to have *any* of these people in your operation.

Here is the difficult truth of the day: It's hard when people quit and go—but it's harder when they quit and stay! Your mission is too important to be dragging along people who don't want to be a part of it.

Your Success = Future Success

When it comes to managing the occasional bad apple on your school nutrition team, you don't need a whistle. You just need to develop your leadership skills, work on improving your own attitude and be willing to make the hard decisions. Over time, as you get better at dealing with employee problems, you will have fewer problem employees to deal with. Then, you can watch as *everybody* wins: you, your team, your district, your community and, most important, the kids! **SN**

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