Attitude adjustment

Every hobby store has employees with negative attitudes; deal with them the right way and you can turn them into positive performers

BY PHILLIP M. PERRY

Do your employees interact well with shoppers? Do they engage with them in ways that spark sales and promote loyalty?

In the best of worlds, you would always answer “yes.” The reality is every business has a few employees with negative attitudes, which can create negative interactions with customers. And even the sunniest workers have bad days, caused by anything from a perceived snub from a supervisor to home troubles. Whatever the reason, the result is the same: a grumpy employee who alienates customers. And that means lost sales and lower profits.

Negativity can take many forms. Here are three examples:

1) James is bad-mouthing a customer who just left the store. Worse still, another customer overheard his remarks. James may tell you, “Management really stinks here.”

2) You overhear Margaret telling a customer, “I know what you did.”

3) Andrew says, “It’s not my job,” when asked to provide a customer with special service.

Act quickly

All of those scenarios — and others like them — can alienate customers and dent your bottom line. That’s why it’s important to take action before matters get worse.

“Quick attention is essential in dealing with negative behavior,” says Ian Jacobsen, a management consultant for Jacobsen Consulting, based in Morgan Hill, Calif. “Issues that are allowed to fester may grow out of proportion and become the impetus for still more negative behavior.”

An employee who is not confronted about undesirable workplace activity will assume the practice is acceptable, Jacobsen says. Moreover, destructive behavior can spread to other workers. Soon your high-performing employees will become frustrated because they have to pick up the work left by the slackers. Finally, as destructive attitudes spread, you may start to view yourself as a manager who cannot handle challenging employees.

Gather data

Acting fast is one thing. But just what should you do?

Start by engaging with the employee involved. “Take the employee aside and describe exactly what you have seen or heard,” Jacobsen says.

Here’s an example of such a description based on a supervisory response to our first example:

“James, I heard you talking with Amy about one of our customers who has just left the store. You referred to the customer as ‘a pain in the neck.’ This isn’t what I would expect from you. What was that about?”

Notice the words reflect the position of an observer who is simply gathering data. Avoid using terms that suggest judgment or cast a bad light on the employee’s intentions or motivation. Terms such as “bad-mouthing” or “rudeness” or “negative behavior” can quickly backfire by putting the employee on the defensive.

And an employee who is trying to defend his actions is not in the right mind-set to resolve behavior issues. “Think of yourself as being like a newspaper reporter just reporting the facts,” Jacobsen says.

Once you have stated what you observed, listen to the employee’s response. “Don’t interrupt,” Jacobsen says.

“Instead, wait for a break in the answer and then ask any further questions you need to understand the situation.”

To continue our example, James might tell you that a few days earlier the customer had changed his mind several times regarding a service the store was offering. The frustration in dealing with the customer had angered James. As a result, he found himself letting off steam when dealing with that customer again.

With this information, you have already gone a long way toward resolving the problem. Your data gathering has uncovered what’s affecting James’s behavior: A short fuse with difficult customers.

Once the employee has explained what happened, summarize what you have heard to demonstrate that you understand. Then ask if your summary is accurate. If it’s not, ask for further clarification.

The next step is to get the employee invested in a self-generated solution so the behavior does not recur. “Once the employee affirms that your summary is accurate, ask how the situation could have gone a long way toward resolving the problem. Your data gathering has uncovered what’s affecting James’s behavior: A short fuse with difficult customers.”

Using the last example, you might say something like:

“James, I realize that some of our customers can be demanding. It’s not OK to say something like what you said about them, and the matter was made worse because another customer overheard what you said.
How could you have handled this better?" James might come up with a solution such as counting to 10 or taking a quick walk around the store to let off steam. "If the employee suggests a better way, and it is acceptable, go for it," Jacobsen says. "He has come up with a way to solve the problem." And that's good — compliance will be better if the employee creates his own solution rather than agreeing to one imposed by the boss.

If the employee can't think of a better way, then explain how you would like the situation handled in the future and ask if he can do that. In our example, you might suggest that James speak with you or a supervisor after dealing with a difficult customer, because talking about bad experiences can reduce their negative effects.

If the behavior is serious enough, you should confirm what has transpired in writing and provide a copy to the employee. And don’t forget to follow through.

“There is an old adage: ‘If you expect, you’ve got to inspect,’” Jacobsen says. “Check back from time to time to see if the employee has adopted the desired behavior. If so, commendation is in order. If not, take the person aside again and repeat the above process.” Agree with the employee on a day to follow up.

Coach, not dictator

Notice an important characteristic about the above approach: It represents the work of a coach, not a dictator.

“Do not be heavy handed; do not use more muscle than necessary,” says Dr. Lois P. Frankel, a partner at Corporate Coaching International in Pasadena, Calif. “In the old days, managers would say something like this: ‘I have to tell you that if I hear of this behavior again, your employment may be jeopardized.’ That was considered progressive. But not anymore. Today you want to turn around the situation with the least disruption.”

Helping people improve their performance can also make the corrective process more palatable for the boss. “Too many bosses don’t have these difficult conversations because they are seen as confrontational,” Frankel says. “Replace that confrontational cap with a coach cap. Tell yourself this: ‘My job is to bring out the best in people and make a company that is well-functioning.’”

Improve conditions

Your data gathering may uncover an underlying problem in the workplace. This issue may even be causing the employee’s negative feelings.

“When the performance or attitude of a good employee starts to deteriorate, that can be a sign that something is going wrong in the workplace,” says Richard Avdoian, an employee development consultant based near St. Louis. “You want to find out what it is — and nip it in the bud.”

Let’s examine our second scenario. Why did Margaret tell a customer, “Management really stinks here?”

During your data-gathering discussion described earlier, Margaret may tell you, “We used to have flextime, and they took that away last month.”

Your response should acknowledge both the issue and your desire to meet the employee’s needs. You might say, “I kind of feel the same; I wish that had not gone away. But let’s talk about how your needs can be met.”

Although your workplace might not be able to offer flextime, it might be able to offer individuals a little more leeway in adjusting schedules to meet family needs.

Changes that arise from coaching sessions can modify the workplace in ways that benefit all employees and result in great customer satisfaction.

Tougher action

So far, this article discussed occasional negative behavior. Persistent negative behavior requires tougher action. “If the behavior is persistent, then there must be accountability,” Avdoian says.

Consider our third scenario. Andrew, who said that a requested service was “not my job,” needs to be reminded that every employee has to be ready to pitch in with duties that may well be outside of the parameters outlined in a job description.

The coaching procedure outlined in this article should help Andrew come around to a better attitude. If not, then the only remaining option is to refer to your organization’s progressive disciplinary measures that lead to termination.

P. Frankel

Phillip M. Perry is an award-winning business writer based in New York City. Email: philcape@yahoo.com.