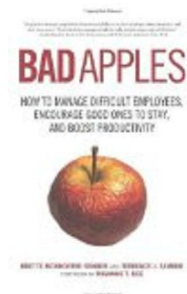


## How to inoculate your team against contagious blame and negativity

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Andy Smith in Emotional Intelligence, Emotional Intelligence, Leadership, Team building, bad apples, emotional climate, leadership, no asshole rule, team building



Because I run in-house courses for a lot of different clients, I get exposed to a lot of first impressions of different workplaces. You can pick up a sense of the atmosphere of a particular office very quickly - some of them feel like they would be great places to work, while others would fall into the 'avoid at all costs' category.

The 'emotional climate' in your team - the overall mood of the workplace, which influences how people relate to each other, how they feel when they are at work, and the range of emotional responses they expect from their colleagues - has a powerful effect on staff turnover and on performance. Various studies have shown the beneficial effect of a positive mood on specific aspects of performance such as creativity, quality of decision making, and conflict resolution (Barsade and Gibson, "[Why Does Affect Matter in Organizations?](#)", Academy of Management Perspectives Feb 2007).

A healthy emotional climate at work doesn't just happen by itself. Recent studies back up what most of us have observed informally - that negativity and blame can be contagious, and that a 'bad apple' will influence the behaviour of the whole team.

It doesn't take much to influence people to blame others. A [study](#) by USC's Nathanael Fast and Sanford's Larissa Tiedens asked people to read a report about the 2005 ballot defeat of Governor Schwarzenegger's efforts to reshape the state government of California. In one version of the report, the governor blamed special interests for the defeat, while in another version he took full responsibility.

The researchers then asked the participants to write a short essay to explain a time in their lives when they had failed. The participants who had read the article about Schwarzenegger blaming special interests blamed others twice as much for their own personal failures. Repeating the experiment with blaming and non-blaming versions of other articles about failures gave a similar result.

[Another study](#) at Indiana University suggests that people are more influenced by the opinions of others when those opinions are negative, and that privately held negative attitudes are harder to change than positive ones. This implies that other things being equal, negative attitudes will spread at the expense of the positive.

Finally, [research](#) by William Felps and Terence Mitchell at the University of Washington found that people who don't do their fair share of work, who are emotionally unstable or who bully others can become 'bad apples' who affect the emotional climate of the whole team, as 'negative' behaviour

outweighs positive behaviour.

So, what can you do to improve the 'emotional climate' of your team?

**1. Deal with the 'bad apples'.** Make sure you screen them out at the hiring stage. Robert Sutton's book ['The No Asshole Rule'](#) is very good on why it's not worth hiring 'destructive jerks'. No matter how talented they are, they are not worth the damage they cause to the morale and increased turnover of their colleagues.

If you already have a 'bad apple' in your team, address their behaviour. This is something that many managers shy away from. Books that can help you are ['Bad Apples: How to Manage Difficult Employees, Encourage Good Ones To Stay, and Boost Productivity'](#) by Terrance Sember and Brette Sember, and ['Fierce Conversations'](#) by Susan Scott.

#### Books to help you deal with 'bad apples'



The No Asshole ...  
PhD. Robert I. Su...  
\$2.95

Bad Apples: Ho...  
Terrance Sember, ...  
\$10.67

Fierce Convers...  
Susan Scott (Pap...  
\$9.79

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**2. Lead by example.** In any group, the leader is the person to whom people look for clues as to how to respond when there is uncertainty, or a situation not previously encountered. The leader therefore is a key influence on the emotional climate of a group. Most leaders don't realise how much influence they have on the mood of their team.

A “resonant” leader creates a positive mood throughout the organisation, their example encouraging everyone to contribute their best efforts. A “dissonant” leader who engenders a climate of anxiety and doubt - through undermining people, outbursts of anger, or a consistently glum outlook - acts as a brake on the performance of the whole organisation.

**3. Don't be afraid to show emotion.** The more expressive the leader (in facial expression, voice tone, and gesture), the more influence he or she will have on the overall emotional climate. Inexpressive, stone-faced, monotone bosses create an 'emotional power vacuum' that a more junior but more expressive team member can step into and become the 'emotional team leader'.

**4. Even if you are not the boss, you can still have a positive influence on the emotional climate.** If your boss has left an 'emotional power vacuum', it is even more important that you

maintain yourself in a positive state. This will 'resonate' with your colleagues and influence them to feel and perform better.

To turn around the emotional climate in your team, it's worth looking into positive psychology and Appreciative Inquiry. Our briefing paper, [What Is Appreciative Inquiry?](#), is a good place to start.

What are your experiences of the emotional climate at work? And what are your tips for dealing with 'bad apples' or improving the emotional climate?

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