Almost every surgical department has at least one—the person who finds faults in most everyone and everything. The “negaholic” gossips, complains, and discounts new ideas—dragging down unit morale and effectiveness.

Tim Porter O’Grady, RN, EdD, CS, CNAA, FAAN, an international expert in conflict issues, governance, leadership, and health systems futures, suggests a 3-part strategy for nursing leaders to work effectively with the negative people on their staff.

“Your plan needs to be rational, logical, and long term,” Porter-O’Grady says. “A lot of managers know the negaholic causes problems but wait until a flare-up occurs to react rather than act.”

1. Determine the behavior gap
   A manager’s first job in dealing with negative staff is to seek out the root cause of their destructive behavior.
   “The more specific you can become in identifying the source of the individual’s behavior, the more successful you will be in effecting change,” Porter-O’Grady says.
   He believes there are 3 primary reasons for the negaholic’s attitude and actions:
   1. Unresolved personal problems the person brings to work.
   2. A past work experience, such as a broken promise from management or loss of faith in the organization, that changed the person’s dynamic from hopeful and positive to dark and pointless. “The negaholic thinks, ‘If I can’t be successful, why should anyone else be?’” Porter-O’Grady says.
   3. Job dissatisfaction. “The person may just be mismatched for the job,” he says. “It’s amazing how many people will say, ‘I didn’t realize how unhappy I was until I changed positions.’ The leader may need to be the catalyst to make that happen.”
   To analyze the gap between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, Porter-O’Grady suggests meeting with the person privately to review situations where the person behaved negatively. Ask what it was about the situation that triggered the inappropriate response or made the person unhappy or angry.
   “Get them to focus on the driving force underlying their behavior,” Porter-O’Grady says.
   Managers also need to look at themselves and whether they’ve allowed the behavior to persist.
   “Often the negaholic’s behavior got bad because it was never confronted early,” he says. “It became a successful way of getting a desired outcome.”

2. Set behavioral expectations
   The next step is removing the opportunity for this behavior to be successful by laying out expectations and parameters of acceptable behavior, Porter-O’Grady says.
   “You need to be willing to have some constructive confrontations with this person,” he says. “This is the tough-love part of management where managers tend to pull back. As a leader, you’ve got to be clear about and define what normative behavior is, then hold your staff accountable.”
   Managers also need to practice self-restraint in their own behavior and not react in the same way the negaholic is reacting.
   “A good problem solver always stays outside the circle and operates from that vantage point,” he says.
   Porter-O’Grady recommends the following script for the manager to say to staff
when setting behavioral expectations. The manager can instruct staff to:

• Note your feelings. Tell people how you feel—don’t act it out. Say, “I feel nervous, I feel pressure, I feel upset, I feel discounted.”

• Raise questions instead of denying the value of other people’s suggestions.

• Share your thoughts, not your judgments. For instance, when responding to someone’s idea, begin with, “I think,” “I feel,” “I need,” or “I want,” rather than “I agree,” “I disagree,” “I like,” or “I don’t like.”

• Make your contribution to a discussion, then hold back from making another contribution until at least 3 other people have shared their thoughts and feelings. “Negaholics tend to hog discussions,” Porter-O’Grady says. “It’s important to remove them from being the center of attention.”

• Count to 10 when you feel your temperature rising before you react. After you count to 10, take a deep breath, and then respond appropriately.

**Defining consequences**

To define the consequences of the negaholic’s behavior, Porter-O’Grady suggests this scripting:

“This behavior cannot continue and affects patient care because:

• it has an impact on our ability to solve problems
• it impedes our ability to relate and communicate well with each other
• it undermines our effectiveness and decision making
• it alienates you from your peers and affects your relationships with the team
• it makes others angry
• it shifts our focus from the issue to you—you become the problem instead of the problem on the table.”

Negaholics often try to deflect the focus from themselves to others. “You need to be specific and clear because the negaholic is a smart character,” he says.

For instance, if the negaholic tries to lay blame elsewhere, he recommends that the manager says, “This conversation today is about you. It’s not about Nancy, Joe, or Sharon. If I need to deal with Nancy, Joe, or Sharon, I commit to do that. In addition, your behavior should not be predicated on someone else’s behavior.

“Don’t let them shift the focus off themselves,” he says. “That’s what gets managers lost 90% of the time. Stay focused, stay on the individual, and allow no externalization, blame, or side conversations to infiltrate the conversation.”

**3. Facilitate behavior change**

The final step is defining action steps negative staff members need to take and commitments they need to make to change their behavior.

The first step, where you get a sense of why the person is acting out, lays the groundwork, Porter-O’Grady says.

“About 70% of the time, if you have been fair, consistent, direct, and specific in your approach in helping them identify the root cause of their behavior, they usually can make the necessary adjustments,” he says.

For instance, the person might disclose she feels fat and ugly and unhappy with her life. In this case, the leader can help her identify steps she can take to deal with her issues.

“Remember, you are the leader, not the therapist. You are not their help, but you can help them to get help,” Porter-O’Grady says. Other scripting that can facilitate change includes:

• “What can we do to help you deal with this, so it doesn’t become your way of playing in the world?”
• “What is the next step we need to take?”
• “What can I do to facilitate this next step?”
• “How will we know this step is taken?”

There still are the 30% who have toughened in the negative role and are so broken they have no interest in a more positive approach to living and working. These
people usually end up on a disciplinary pathway, Porter-O’Grady says.

“With the negaholic, you should begin with the possible and the potential,” he says. “The reason you resort to discipline is because you have failed at re-energizing or reconnecting them to their stifled creative energy and to their role in the community.”

— Leslie Flowers

Leslie Flowers is a freelance writer in Indianapolis.

Tim Porter-O’Grady will present an all-day seminar on Leadership in an Evidence-Based World and breakout sessions on “negaholics” at the Managing Today’s OR Suite conference Nov 8 to 10 in Orlando, Fla. A conference brochure will be in the April OR Manager.

Addressing gossip head on

Gossip is one of the greatest detractors to staff morale.

David Maxfield, director of research at VitalSmarts, a company that studies and incorporates best practices into management, suggests dealing with gossipers in a 3-stage approach described in Crucial Confrontations (McGraw-Hill 2004), the business bestseller for which he was lead researcher.

“This kind of problem is rarely addressed head-on, and it should be. Instead, what most people do is counter gossip with gossip,” Maxfield says. The 3 steps are:

1. Work on yourself
   Decide what the real problem is and what may motivate the gossiper.

2. Create safety
   “We typically fail in creating safety because, to be honest, we don’t care about the other person’s interests, and we don’t respect him or her,” Maxfield says.
   “When we speak up, the other person senses we are there for our own selfish interests, feels unsafe, and becomes defensive. Defensiveness is a safety problem.”
   To counter defensiveness and relay positive intentions and respect for the other person, Maxfield suggests saying: “May I talk with you about a concern I’ve got? My reason for bringing it up is that I want to make sure this OR stays a fun and effective place to work. I don’t want you to think this is too big of a deal. I enjoy working with you, and you’re a valuable contributor here in the OR. I want to talk about gossiping.”

3. Move to action
   After the confrontation, the manager can say, “I’m glad you’re on board with this. Of course, we all talk about everything from time to time, and it can slip into gossip. If you see me start to make that slide, please give me the eye or tap me on the shoulder, and I’d like to be able to remind you, too. OK?”


David Maxfield will present an all-day seminar on Wednesday, Nov 8, during the Managing Today’s OR Suite conference Nov 8 to 10 in Orlando, Fla.