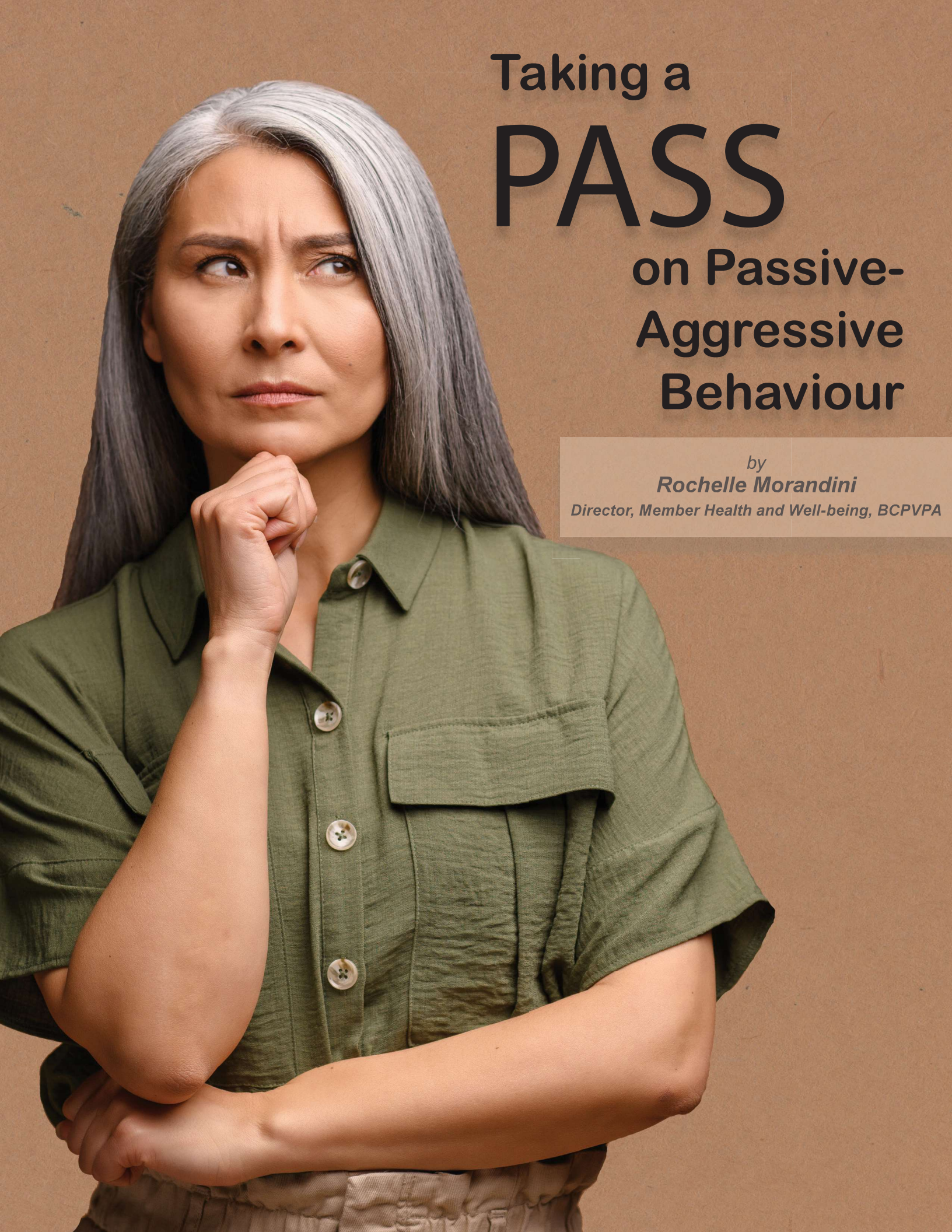




Taking a

PASS

on Passive-
Aggressive
Behaviour

by

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Principals and Vice-Principals – along with their wide variety of regular connections – exhibit a vast buffet of personality traits and behaviours. One of the most troubling behaviours, whether modeled by a leader or by someone on their team, is passiveness. It can be even more concerning when that individual is passive-aggressive. These ineffectual coping styles are learned behaviour patterns that often begin in childhood. When left unaddressed, passive and passive-aggressive behaviours can:

- Have a negative impact on relationships at work and at home
- Result in a deterioration of the passive individual's mental health
- Be time-consuming and impactful on a leader's ability to lead staff or any specific individual
- Significantly impact the success and effective functioning of a school team

Being Passive

Passive behaviours put the needs of someone else before your own. In the role of a Principal or Vice-Principal, there will be times when you need to put someone else first. For example, you will put your needs aside – even if you are exhausted – to ensure that a student is receiving the proper duty of care. However, regular passive behaviour is not hero behaviour but rather a refusal to care for your own needs.

Passive behaviour is often designed to avoid conflict. Unlike someone who is passive-aggressive, someone who is passive does not attempt to convince or coerce someone to give them what they want. Individuals who are passive may have social anxiety, low self-esteem, and poor confidence. They may live in their disappointment, which can lead to unmet needs and make the person feel more anxious and even more passive. This is a cycle that, over time, can have a significant impact on their mental health; it can be extremely hard to break, resulting in the need

for professional intervention. Examples of passive behaviour could include:

- Staying quiet when someone criticizes you unjustly
- Not speaking up when someone leaves you out of a conversation or a meeting invitation
- Letting others take credit for your work

Are you passive? You may be, if your own answer aligns with the bracketed responses below:

- Do you stand up for yourself as often as you should? (*No*)
- Do you often find yourself saying "yes" to things, when you really wanted to say "no" (*Yes*)
- Do you feel people often take advantage of your kindness and generosity? (*Yes*)
- If someone takes advantage of you, do you confront them about it? (*No*)
- Do you worry about what other people think of you? (*Yes*)
- Do you avoid confrontation or conflict? (*Yes*)
- Are you concerned about hurting someone's feelings? (*Yes*)

Take this quiz to find out your degree of passiveness:



Being Passive and the Impact on your Mental Health

Being passive becomes a concern when this behaviour is your regular 'go to'.

Although passive people may not always agree or be satisfied with the decisions made by others, they can find it easier to go along with these decisions to 'keep

the peace' rather than cause a commotion. However, over time, passive people may start to resent the fact that their needs are always overlooked. This trend may result in low self-esteem, depression, anger, and other emotional or physical complaints. Additionally, people who are very passive can be exploited, and may lose the respect of others when they fail to stand up for their rights. Passive people may feel:

- Annoyed that the needs of others are being met, while their needs go unnoticed
- Frustrated for not speaking up and allowing themselves to be in an undesirable position
- Worried that if they make a request, someone else's needs will not be met, and they will appear selfish
- Unappreciated, as they do not get the recognition they deserve
- Used and manipulated by others
- Guilty, if they think that they have not been nice or considerate enough
- Stressed, for taking on more than they can handle, and for having to put up with bad behaviour

Passive-Aggressive

Being passive does not always mean that someone is passive-aggressive, but it may foreshadow passive-aggressive behaviour. When someone is passive, they are unable to confront a situation directly. They may avoid telling others how they feel so that they can avoid conflict. Over time, this hurt, anger, and frustration may lead to passive-aggressive tendencies that need to be addressed.

When someone on your team demonstrates passive-aggressive behaviour, you may notice a disconnect between what they say and what they do. While the behaviour may not always be conscious or intentional, it can be confusing and challenging to manage as a leader.

The one main difference between someone who is passive and an individual who is passive-aggressive is that a passive person keeps their negative feelings inside (not healthy!), where the passive-aggressive person expresses their negative feelings indirectly. This can be manifested in their attempts to control or coerce situations or people through a variety of tactics. Consider these scenarios:

"Being passive does not always mean that someone is passive-aggressive, but it may foreshadow passive-aggressive behaviour."



- The Principal chooses the idea of one teacher for a school event. The other teacher, whose idea was not selected, spends the entire day of the event complaining about the idea and the activities.
- A parent is frustrated when they haven't received a response to their email, so they send multiple follow-up emails asking if their first message was received.
- A staff member is upset, so they punish the Principal by delaying responses or not tending to important requests in a timely manner.

Other passive-aggressive behaviour examples include:

- Gossiping or speaking poorly about people in their absence or openly criticizing someone in a circumstance where their name can be overheard by others
- Intentionally doing a task poorly
- Withholding opinions and information
- Ignoring notes from coworkers
- Missing deadlines
- Abusing policies
- Procrastination

We can see how these behaviours are concerning for leaders, as these actions from passive-aggressive individuals can cause serious performance problems and relationship damage within your team, including a breakdown in trust.

Being Assertive

A more effective and healthier approach to relationships and leadership is to be assertive. Using assertive communication:

- Involves standing up for your rights in a way that does not violate another person's rights

- Is achieved through strong self-esteem and confidence
- Involves advocating for yourself and your own interests, without apologizing

Assertiveness is the ability to communicate opinions, thoughts, needs, and feelings in a direct, honest, and appropriate manner. When you are assertive, you have more control over your life, and you are less likely to allow others to take advantage of you.

Assertive people care about other people's feelings, and phrase their requests or complaints in a polite, firm, professional manner. They have a sense of 'give and take', and are co-operative in times of conflict.

Assertive people assess each situation and decide which action is most appropriate. They can bend and yield if necessary; for example, they may be more flexible in situations where they believe the staff member is unwell, but may be more firm when the situation requires the leader to stand up for their own rights. Assertive people try to choose the most appropriate behaviour for the situation, have control over their behaviour, and have respect for themselves and others.

Assertive behaviour is something you can learn and practice until it becomes second nature. Here are some tips for communicating in assertive ways, without falling back on passive-aggressive behaviour:

- State your needs clearly and directly
- Express your feelings in appropriate ways
- Show respect for other people
- Use 'I' statements
- Listen to others without interrupting
- Speak calmly and clearly

- Let people know when they hurt you
- Stand up for yourself
- Do not allow others to manipulate or harm you
- Accept that others are free to make their own decisions

Here are tips to consider as you start to become more assertive:

- Only set barriers that you are willing and able to defend. If you make threats that you do not intend to keep ("I'll quit this job!"), people will not take seriously your attempts to be assertive.
- Don't start to get assertive when you are strained to the limit. Remember that the relationship will get tougher for a while. Pick a time when you have the strength to handle the pressure.
- Don't back down. When you set the barrier and the other person begins to push against it, be prepared to protect your set boundary. Otherwise, the person will push harder the next time.

Don't get assertive with everyone in your life all at once. Pick one issue at a time.

Being assertive and knowing the ins and outs of assertive communication is easier said than done. This is especially true if you have been passive your whole life, and assertiveness doesn't come naturally to you. You may be passive due to entrenched beliefs

and practiced behaviours that stem from:

- Your caregiver's parenting style when you were a child
- A fear of rejection or a fear of conflict
- A need to maintain control
- Difficulty expressing emotions

Assertiveness is a skill that can be learned, so seek out the help of a coach or counsellor who can help you through this process. Being assertive will feel uncomfortable at first, but with guidance and practice, an assertive communication style can become your regular approach.

Moving Forward

As a leader, you are expected to manage your team and address behaviours that are causing concern or impacting the school culture. Learning to be assertive will help you to frame your thoughts and concerns whether you are meeting with individuals on your staff, identifying unproductive behaviour, or discussing expectations. If these discussions come to a standstill, and the behaviours continue, reach out to Human Resources for their guidance and support.

For further reading on how to be assertive in the workplace, check out this article:



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How to Manage a Passive-aggressive team member



Detecting passive-aggressiveness may be challenging but – left unchecked – it can be poisonous to the work environment. Leaders need to act: while dealing with a passive-aggressive team member can be frustrating and uncomfortable, ignoring the problem will not improve the situation. Do not take it personally, take an empathetic approach, and address the challenge head on.

It is important to confront passive-aggressive people directly face-to-face, rather than through indirect forms of communication such as email, as you can get your message across more clearly in person.

Here are some excellent tips from MindTools.com for managing passive-aggressive people at work:

1) Identify the Behaviour

The first step in addressing passive aggression is to recognize it, which can be challenging due to the often subtle nature of indirect actions.

Deal with passive-aggressive behaviour straight away, so that it doesn't escalate. Make notes on situations as they occur, so that you have specific examples of what your team member has done to provide clarity and context to your discussion.

2) Create a Safe Environment

Let the person know that it's safe for them to raise concerns and discuss issues with you openly, rather than in covert ways. Make it clear to them that, as their leader, you would rather they come to you with their problems, and that you are open to this dialogue, rather than allowing issues to bubble under the surface.

You need to act in a way that aligns with this promise by encouraging, praising, and supporting people who bring matters to your attention.

3) Use Language Carefully

Give accurate feedback and be careful with the language you use. For instance, instead of complaining that someone is 'always' late, specify their exact arrival times for the past week and give them an opportunity for explanation. Remind them of the agreed working hours, and ask them to arrive on time in future. If there are barriers presented, provide them with an appropriate level of support and understanding to find solutions.

Although it's important to be direct and to address the issue head on, try to avoid 'you' statements. This will prevent the other person feeling attacked, and moving to a defensive posture. Instead, use first-person pronouns, such as 'I', 'we', and 'our', and explain the effect of the behaviours on you, their teammates, and even on school operations. For instance, you might say, "I noticed that the report was two days late," instead of, "You failed to meet the deadline."

4) Stay Calm

You may make the situation worse if you react emotionally to your team member. They may feel threatened, withdraw further, and become even more entrenched in their negative behaviours.

Speak to the person in a measured, even tone, and remain composed. They might not even realize they are being passive-aggressive, so use an empathic approach to defuse any anxiety or anger. However, if the behaviour continues, you may need to circle back to the conversation and work toward collaborative solutions. If you feel this is becoming a case of workplace conduct, seek guidance from Human Resources.

5) Identify the Cause

If passive-aggressive people claim that they are 'fine' when their behaviour suggests otherwise, probe more deeply by asking questions to identify the root of the problem. Give them the opportunity to explain themselves, and don't let them pass the blame.

For instance, someone may be responding negatively to a disappointing work decision, such as being passed over for promotion. Ask them if their behaviour stems from this, and explain that you want to understand how they feel. Let them know that you will work with them to explore other ways that they might handle the situation more constructively such as improving a particular skill so that they have a better chance of promotion the next time.

6) Provide Training

Consider providing or arranging for some one-to-one coaching or formal mediation to help your team member learn how to communicate assertively.

7) Set Clear Standards and Consequences

Establish clear standards, and regularly restate what you want from team members so that you can hold them to account. It is important to explain that negative behaviour will not be tolerated in the work culture, and to set out the consequences for persistent behaviours.

Confirm in writing any discussions that you have about deadlines and actions by sending follow-up emails after meetings. That way, your team member will have clarity as to what you expect from them, and the documentation will be important should the situation escalate.

8) Open Channels of Communication

Passive-aggressive people often lack good communication skills because they struggle to express their emotions openly. They may prefer to send emails, rather than address issues face-to-face. When this is the case, encourage them to develop the skills and confidence to speak to others directly.

If your team members know that you welcome their insights and opinions, they are more likely to talk openly about issues. Be a good role model and communicate regularly with them. Be visible and available to your team, develop strong relationships, build trust, and identify problems before they escalate.

Find out more from
[Mindtools.com](https://www.mindtools.com)

