Combating Workplace Negativity
By Cheryl DeMarco

How many besides me have worked in an environment where people were constantly gossiping? How did it feel to work in a place like that?
How many besides me have worked with someone who constantly complained about everything? What did you do about that person?
Who besides me has worked with people who go into a tailspin over every change at work? How did that behavior affect you?

Negativity is a habit. When negativity takes over in a workplace, it becomes a part of the culture. Cultural negativity requires a radical restructuring of the entire work environment, and that culture change takes a minimum of five years. The key is to keep negativity from taking hold in the first place, because the impact of workplace negativity on your business can be devastating. Some business consequences of negativity can be:

- Customer complaints
- Errors and poor work quality
- Increased employee turnover
- Absence and lateness issues
- Personality conflicts
- Poor morale
- Lack of motivation
- Loss of loyalty to the organization
- Decreased creativity

The effects of negativity are measurable and will affect the bottom line in your business. It will also affect you as a worker, both mentally and physically, at home as well as at work. Workers in a negative, low morale work environment are likely to take their attitude home with them. Long-term negativity creates a perpetual state of emotional hijack - the fight or flight reaction, which in turn affects health and relationships. Ingrained workplace negativity is a serious problem that requires a detailed and comprehensive solution involving long-term planning and dedication to change. In this article I'll give you some insights and tips on how to deal with individual negativity: yours and your co-workers.

Let's start with our own negativity. How do you recognize when you've gone negative?

- Thoughts
- Verbal negativity
- Non-verbal - body language
- Para-language - tone of voice, volume, not speaking at all.

Negative thoughts:
- I'm trapped in this job
- My boss is an idiot
- This place sucks
- My coworker does less and gets paid more
- This new project is really stupid
- I can't wait for 5:00!

What do you think the effects of this kind of thinking might be on your mental health? How about your physical condition?

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Negativity is a choice. Feeling trapped in a job is a choice. Resenting your boss because he's a boob is a choice. No one is actually trapped in a job; there are always choices. You can:

· Choose to find another job,
· Stay and make the best of your situation
· Stay and make the worst of it.

When we (and I've done this way more than I like to admit) gossip, criticize the boss, talk about how the place we work sucks, we become that least attractive of all humans: the victim. We make our workplace even worse for ourselves and for everyone else.

What to do? Instead, become part of the solution. Recognize your own negativity, and ask for help. If you are a manager or business owner, nothing models responsibility better than asking your employees to help you make a change in attitude. Tell them individually that you are trying to become more positive, and ask for suggestions. No matter what the answer, say only, "thank you". Then use the best of the suggestions. Take responsibility for your choice. Then change it. Do this for 21 days, and it will be a habit.

So what if your employee or coworker is the negative one? What do you do then? If it is a coworker to whom you are not close, you can listen to that person's complaints and say something like "that's an interesting perspective, but I don't see it that way", or something of the sort. Eventually that person will either stop complaining to you, or take the hint that you want positive, not negative input.

If the coworker a friend, you might address her negativity in a fun way: put out two negativity jars, one for you and one for her. Whenever one of you catches the other saying something negative, a dollar goes in the jar. After 21 days, the person with the least money in the jar gets the proceeds from both jars.

If you are a manager or boss, be very careful about assessing attitude when hiring. Listen carefully to what the prospective employee says about his/her former employer. Look for hints of negativity and follow your gut feeling about whether or not to hire that person.

If you have an employee who has gone negative, react quickly. Confer with the person and learn what it is that is causing the change in attitude. Help him/her recognize the reason for negativity. Sometimes the negativity is justified, and you should acknowledge that. If possible, discuss ways to resolve whatever issues come up in the discussion.

Help this person take responsibility for negativity. Even if there are valid reasons to feel negative, the expression of negativity is never appropriate in the workplace. You may not be able to change the way your employee sees the situation, but you can influence behavior during work hours.

Help the person replace negative behaviors with more positive ones. Be specific. Tell the employee exactly what behavior you have observed, how it is affecting the job and people in your workplace. Then describe precisely what you want to see instead.

Follow up with feedback on a regular basis, and acknowledge progress toward the new goal. Sometimes you will have no choice but to fire a really negative person. If so, do it before that person has the time and opportunity to infect your workplace. Any delay will create harm that lasts long after that employee is gone.

Meanwhile, model the behavior you want to see in your employees. Everything you do and say as a leader is observed and internalized by your employees, so be the change you want to see.

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