

Overcome 'negative vibes' among your staff: 10 tips



Every HR pro and manager has to deal with a certain amount of pessimistic, hostile or uncooperative behavior at times. It's just part of the workplace. But a hardcore negative attitude that starts with just one employee can quickly infect an entire department (or sometimes a whole company) if you don't rein it in quickly. The ugly result: A workplace that's rife with backstabbing, gossiping and rebellious employees. Cal Butera, the editor of Business Management Daily's *Office Manager Today*, *Manager's Legal Bulletin*, *Managing People at Work* and *Communication Briefings* newsletters, provides the top 10 tips for confronting employees whose negative behavior has begun to affect co-workers and the company.

- 1. Don't get drawn into the employees' negative mindset.** Listen to their points, but don't temper your own realistic optimism.
- 2. Avoid getting into an argument.** Negative people thrive on the negative energy of arguments. Point out areas of agreement when possible in order to build rapport. Keep your cool.
- 3. Set standards.** Spell out the consequences of negative behavior, such as decreased morale. Base them on behavior, not attitude. For example, you may not be able to change the fact that an employee doesn't like a certain company policy. But you can discipline employees if they don't follow the policy or are insubordinate in gossiping about it.
- 4. Ask questions.** Force the employee to be specific about what is creating his or her negative thoughts and actions.
- 5. Try role-playing.** Ask the employee to put himself in your shoes and pretend he has been asked to resolve the problem. That way, you will have the employee contribute his ideas for the best possible solutions. Involving the employee may also lead to more positive feelings about the solution or outcome since he or she had a hand in creating it.
- 6. Listen carefully.** Use active listening to ensure that you're understanding the employee correctly.
- 7. Don't lower your expectations of the employee.** A negative attitude doesn't necessarily mean a poor performer.
- 8. Empower employees.** Stop the "victim" mentality from forming. Allow employees to take responsibility for

"good" events, so they can make them happen again, and for the "bad" events, so they have the power to change them in the future.

9. Solicit feedback. Always ask for employees' opinions before making major decisions that will affect them. The more you listen to employees, and take an active interest in their concerns, the less likely they will be to complain to each other.

10. Hire right. Identify negative people before they're hired. During the interview, listen for feelings that "life isn't fair" in response to questions like: *Have you ever felt you've been treated unfairly in the past? What were your chief concerns about management in your previous jobs? and What would you have changed if you were the manager at your last job?*

Along with those 10 tips, here are four things you should NEVER do in your effort to stop negativity from wrecking your workplace:

1. Don't shower negativists with a lot of attention. You're only rewarding bad behavior.

2. Don't stop asking them to pitch in and do tasks outside their normal job descriptions. Otherwise, you're also punishing positive (or less vocal) employees.

3. Don't correct them less often in order to avoid dealing with the attitude. Employees can't be expected to change for the better if they're not asked to.

4. Don't allow employees to get bored or complacent. A negative attitude develops easily when there's "nothing to look forward to."

QUIZ: Is negativity a problem in your department?

Gripes, conflicts and a certain amount of negativity are common in all environments. But it's important for managers to be aware of the signs of creeping pessimism before their department becomes overrun by Negative Nellies.

Place a check next to the behaviors that are common in your department:

- ☐ Increased complaining
- ☐ A focus on why things can't be done
- ☐ Lack of hope that things can or will get better
- ☐ Normally positive people exhibit atypical negative behavior
- ☐ Insistence on perfection rather than excellence
- ☐ Denial of reality
- ☐ Inability to cope with growth or downsizing
- ☐ Excessive need to control
- ☐ The tendency to lay blame rather than problem solve
- ☐ A rigid approach to problem-solving

- ☐ Unwilling to change, even if for the better
- ☐ Acting with uncertainty
- ☐ Expressing dissatisfaction
- ☐ Giving a perfunctory performance, showing no life or spark
- ☐ Anti-management sentiments
- ☐ Fears of job loss fears
- ☐ Boundary issues, constant challenge of authority
- ☐ Desire for dissension
- ☐ Relying on news from the “grapevine”

Note: *The more boxes you checked, the more negativity that’s simmering in your department. Use the steps in the main article to get things under control.*