Think positive: Turnaround tactics for negative employees

Negative employees aren't just difficult to lead, they can create pervasive and lasting damage to your team's collective culture, attitude, motivation and ability to succeed.

Given that an estimated 70% of employees don't like their jobs, it's likely that you'll come up against at least one negative employee in the span of your management career.

Though your initial reaction may be to get rid of a negative employee as swiftly as possible, it's not always a quick or feasible solution. Plus, you run the risk of backlash from human resources and other team members who are left to pick up the pieces once the employee leaves.

Instead of trying to oust a negative employee, try these tips to identify the root cause behind the bad attitude, to see if there's any chance of helping the employee stage a turnaround.

Prime the employee's brain to focus on the positive

Before assuming that an employee is intentionally negative, consider whether he or she is simply used to pointing out what is wrong, instead of noticing what is right.

In your one-on-one meetings with the employee, focus on the positive. Start the conversation by asking the employee to tell you two things that went right in her job this week, or one thing she enjoyed doing and was proud to be a part of.

Done consistently, you may find that the employee begins to communicate with you and the team in a way that is less negative, simply by shifting her focus away from what's not working.

Cultivate what remains

Management expert and author Marcus Buckingham says managers should not try to fill in whatever void has been created for an employee, nor compensate for what he or she lacks by trying to improve weaknesses. Instead, Buckingham says you can draw out the best parts of that employee that still exist, and cultivate what he or she can still offer the team.

This shifts focus away from what hasn't gone right and toward what's possible in the here and now. Plus, it will quickly reveal what you can do to help the employee—or whether he is so disengaged that there's no turning back.

To encourage the employee to consider what could be improved, ask where she wants to go from this point. Determine if you can find a way to help the employee fulfill that want based on company goals, the team's needs and the employee's role.

If the employee is so disgruntled that the desire to move forward in any capacity has been extinguished, you'll

know and can deal with the situation accordingly.

Don't give advice

Your job as a manager is to support your employee and understand where they want to go—not solve their problems, give advice or fix what they don't do right.

Challenge a negative employee to tell you what she wants to do more of, or what would make her work enjoyable and fulfilling.

Don't get caught up in details like why that hasn't happened up to this point, why she's frustrated, or even how such changes could or would work.

This conversation puts the employee in the position of power, and demands that she consider exactly what needs to happen to reach mutually beneficial solutions.

Once your employee has answered these questions, consider how you can guide her role in the right direction over the next several months.

If the structure of the company, the role or the pressing needs of the team don't allow for the changes the employee would like to see, or allow some of them but don't improve the employee's negativity, you and the employee can have a conversation about whether the role is really the right fit. Regardless of the outcome, you and the employee will both know that you tried your best to solve the problem.