

Working with negative co-workers
By Paul Clayton

All of us at one time have worked with negative co-workers, no matter what the situation, they find something wrong with an issue or person. They will almost always point out what is wrong and why it won't work. They are the ones that almost never have nice things to say about anyone. I don't believe that all of these are in the 100% range; some people are negative about just some things.

For me the big problem is when I am done talking to them: I either get hooked into their negativity by starting to question my thoughts, or by getting angry that they are so negative. I do not think that I will change them, but I don't have to get hooked in.

My approach is to be prepared for what they have to say. If the person is consistently negative then they will probably be negative again. My job is to be prepared emotionally, by giving myself what I call emotional allergy shots. I do this in my mind, I look at the issue and imagine what they are going to say. I then prepare myself for a new response emotionally. I now imagine myself looking at them and saying "I will keep that in mind" or "I appreciate your thoughts" all of the time staying calm and detached. Before I can talk to them I have to remove my resentments toward them. If I don't do this then I am being negative about negative people. Here is what I do in my head. I start by saying to them "I forgive you for not being and thinking like me. I realize that you from your experiences think differently than me and that is OK. After all everyone doesn't have to think like me. I have been wrong before and may even be wrong on this issue too." If I feel OK about the person after a few sessions and then I go talk to them, this time prepared emotionally. Again my job is not to get caught into their negativity and accepting the fact that they are the way they are. They may be there for me to learn something about accepting them in their negativity. This is a great time for the affirmation: Grant me the serenity to accept the people that I can not change, change the ones I can and the wisdom to know the difference. Just a few scattered thoughts that I have today.

If you have to deal with negative people let us know what works for you and I will pass it on.

Responses:

I was reared in a negative environment, and it became a motivational tool for me. Tell me I can't and I will, just to make the point. It can also be a reality check for some plans that may not have included any provisions for things to go wrong, which they will some of the time. Negative people sometimes can be persuaded in to the realm that it is possible that things will go right, but just not probable. I view them as team players who are always benched, and if included in the plan, they might respond. I also think it is important to point out the things that do go right for these people, but never in a gloating fashion. The more they focus on the positive, the more positive they will see. It may take some effort and time, but it is imperative that these people are included in the plan. I

think they need to see that through playing a part in the plan, they will reverse their natural negativity and want it to turn out in a positive fashion. Get them off the bench!!
Damian Dittmer

Keeping "bad karma" at bay is a constant job. The nature of our jobs of dealing with people as they are experiencing financial troubles, have just lost their jobs, are running from a violent domestic situation, are not dealing with substance abuse, etc. can be negative enough for anyone. Realizing I am not responsible for someone else's success or failures helps. I am only an instrument to be used to guide people to the correct resources and offer an encouraging word. I talk to myself (which may allow me to retire early on a disability pension), I remind myself of the positives. I give myself 'pep-talks'.

Dealing with negative co-workers is also a constant. I must be honest and say I have been the negative co-worker others have had to deal with from time to time. Keeping myself in check and scheduling an extra day off or anything to create a break helps to ward off those negative feelings I have.

I used to try to limit my time with my negative co-workers, then I tried finding something positive to say to these folks. This really confuses them. When we are so consumed with negative feelings/thoughts, etc, when someone unexpectedly does something positive I think it throws us off balance.

The random-acts-of-kindness theory works in many ways. The blessings received by the giver are as great, or greater, than those by the receiver.

Patti, Rome, GA

Whenever I talk to one who I believe is negative, I try to keep an open mind and listen for a little while. He/She may have had experiences which would cause their opinion to be different from mine. If I find a person to always be negative or has a reputation of being so, I try to be as calm as I can and consider the source, at least for a while. Thanks for your informative remarks on the subject. Ed.

As far as dealing with difficult people,(and we do every single day), I find that it becomes such a physical and sometimes overwhelming feeling for me. For example, if I am confronted by an angry customer and/or co-worker for one reason or another, I can almost feel my skin burning and I can feel the tension building up enormously. But when I remember to take deep breaths, it truly provides me with the stamina and calmness to get through the difficult situation without further confrontation on my part.

In other words, I try to make the negative situation end once I discover the personality involved. This is not easy My problem here is that it take great strength to use the positive resources given to us for these situations. Sometimes you can lose control and go with the bad. I will continue to work on my reactions during difficult encounters and hopefully, this breathing technique will kick in automatically without fail. Does this make sense to use this method? It sounds silly, but it helps me. Lou Anne

I like your thinking!!! Working with negative co-workers can be frustrating. It doesn't take long to figure out the negative people as they stand out so I always "consider the

source" One of my co-workers & friend is an eternal pessimist. I frequently mention to him that every once in a while the glass really is half full. With regards to the serenity prayer-type philosophy, I control the things I have control on. My work social circle consists of upbeat, positive people. I find the if I have to be in a work situation with a negative person or persons, I can always contact one of my positive co-workers later to help keep me grounded & in an positive frame of mind. I'll leave you with a quote from Helen Keller that I put in our monthly newsletter, "Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope & confidence." NY

We have a negative person in our office also, he has been with the agency about 25years and does not like change, it is difficult for him. I use to get annoyed with him and would get sucked into his dream world. I gave it a lot of thought and decided I didn't want to be like him. So when something changes and I know he will complain about it, I try to think of the worst that can happen with this change and turn it into a positive before he can rip it apart and stomp on it. This may not be the ideal answer to all problems, but it helps me cope with the situation. ME

Responding positively to what a negative person says is also effective. The person realizes there's another side to his/her perception and that I do not think the same way. I have done this and others have done it to me when I was talking negatively. It definitely changed my direction of conversation. M Carter CA

I agree with you in that you have to forgive and understand that the negative person is not like you and may never change. But that was not enough for me. I felt I was way too drawn into the negativity and was very unhappy. It was too hard simply to "tune it out". It seemed to be everywhere and I knew I couldn't make the changes required to stop the complaining, so instead I just changed my own habits and now negative conversations I am involved in are at a minimum.

I stopped eating lunch in the break room and started taking my breaks at odd times so few people were in there. I quit stopping by certain staff member's desk during the day to ask how things were going because I knew where that conversation would lead. I keep very busy and if a notoriously negative person stops by my desk, I do not stop working to chat. They don't stay long and now rarely come by.

This means I am a bit anti-social but it was the only solution for me. The negativity was making me so unhappy that my job was unbearable. I even coined an acronym at one point: "WWW - Wining While Working" . I am always polite and respectable to my co-workers but "all business" since I am no longer part of the "WWW" team. I feel the trade off is worth it and I do not miss those negative "friends" at all. I began to like my job as soon as I made these changes and now am very happy with what I do, even though the same serious problems are still not being addressed by management. It is about 5 years later and the complainers are still miserable and still complaining. I see them huddled in little groups with grim faces but I am blissfully unaware of what they are saying. IA

My approach is you never stop learning; I really will not stay around negative people. I detach myself from them.. They can only bring you down. VA

If someone is saying something negative about a person, I try to say something positive about that person. I probably will not change that negative person's mind, but I may change the opinions of those who are listening. Also, if I am on break & a coworker keeps going on & on about something negative at work (and some days that is all that is said), I politely excuse myself and leave the break room. I go on break to get away from work, and if people are just going to rehash all the negative stuff about work, I might as well return to my desk and get something done, all the while trying to stay positive.
Jenny, IL

Along the lines of an affirmation, I recently prepared for a meeting that I was to attend with an extremely negative "high maintenance" person. I went in internally chanting "[this person] is perfect--[this person] is perfect just the way they are--there is nothing I would change about them. They have something to teach." Works! Thanks.

Listening is one of the best tools for most situations. Often, in a situation where I have given an employee an opportunity to address an issue and there is negative content in the discussion, by actively listening and restating the situation back to them I first get it established that understand what they are saying. It then makes it possible for me to lead into a discussion that allows the employee to look at things in a different way, to possibly effect a shift in their perception and behavior. The behavior won't change if they don't begin to see things differently. It also gives me an opportunity to see something that I may have overlooked. If I realize a small area that I neglected in a project, by addressing or fixing it, it may be enough to get the employee on track and supportive.

This is an overly simplified example and does it not always turn things around. But by giving the employee an opportunity to openly discuss an issue and get behind a situation instead of against it, it diminishes their negative strength. If other staff realize you are discussing the negativity with the employee, there is less chance for a drop in morale.

Some employees will always be negative. As a manager or supervisor you have to assess the significance. I tell my staff that there are 3 aspects of any situation; The stuff to have to do, the stuff that is totally unnecessary and the stuff that you have some wiggle room to take care of, put off, deal with, etc. I tell them first, get rid of the stuff that is unnecessary. Then deal with the immediate necessary stuff. Last, use the room you have with the other stuff to be as flexible and creative in resolving the issue. These are usually long-term planning and implementation situations.

Applying this to a situation of an negative employee, if the employee has no significant or likely effect with their negativity, address it with them and let it go (a pitfall for some managers and supervisors is to spend a great deal of time on the insignificant). If it is a significant and immediate problem to functioning, deal with it quickly and directly.

Usually this will be when it effect production, customer service, communication and can be linked with specific behaviors and duties. If negativity pops up once in a while and might have some effect on functioning, be creative, make a long term plan for assisting this person to a better work style. The hardest thing to do in this approach is developing the skills to differentiate between the 3 aspects.

Finally, if you have tried everything and the employee presents you with a resignation (even if they are "just blowing off steam"), take it and given them a written acceptance. Sometimes the only thing we can do for someone who is unhappy at work is to give them the freedom to explore other pastures. Richard CA

I think it is always important to remember that I control my own behavior. Other people can't control my feelings and my reactions unless I let them. I tell myself that I am too much of a control freak to do that. (I really don't think I'm a control freak in the normal sense, but it is important to be in control of yourself.) I try to approach negative people knowing their history, ready to give them the chance to be positive just this once, grateful for their ability to poke holes in my arguments so that I can better reason an argument for others and determined to keep a positive attitude. Rita IL

As for co workers, doing as you suggest by not allowing myself to be drawn into negativity to the point that I dwell on it is key. Comments or "pat phrases" such as those you suggest are important because they acknowledge what has been said without totally agreeing with it. Any human being can find what is negative about a situation if they search for it. Maybe an extension of your comment could be..."I will keep that in mind, but I just have to believe that tomorrow will be a better day."

It is important to find things you love about your job and focus on those things rather than the negative. Susan GA

When I was growing up I took gymnastics. With any sport (dream, activity), one has to be willing to take risks and make a fool of themselves at first (Charlie Brown knows that). My gymnastics coach at one point said to me.....'stop saying "I can't"'. I will NEVER forget that for some reason. Now, when folks (clients) say "I can't do this, I can't do that", I say....'listen to yourself and how many times a day you say that. Be aware of how much you are limiting yourself without at least TRYING something you haven't done'. So far, this seems to sink in with most people. It's interesting in life what you remember and what's valuable advice, even if it's just a few encouraging words. As far as co-workers go, that's a little touchier. Being the candid person I am, I would just say 'you are being negative, now let me do my work' or put a "Do Not Disturb" sign on your door so you don't have to listen to it. Misty in B-town

Those were some positive thoughts about working with negative people. I think we have to be discerning about the real source of negativity that is displayed. Also, we must be careful to distinguish between apparent negativity and honest disagreement. Someone once said that " a religious fanatic is a person who takes their religion more seriously than I do!"....in other words, negative people's responses, may have very little to do with the subject matter under discussion and more to do with how they feel about you because of

something you said or did previously. Knowing a persons true motivations for negativity is key to being able to change negative behavior, otherwise we will likely respond negatively to what we see on the surface as negativity. Sounds a bit like double talk, but...think positively about it. Bill MA

There is so much negativity in our world, it is understandable that certain people thrive on it. As anyone I am not perfect at not being negative or allowing negative people to draw me in. What I try to do is remain positive and encourage a positive atmosphere. I appreciate your thoughts and the fact that you remembered my concern. Ronda IA