The symptoms may seem unconnected at first — muttered complaints, furrowed brows, perfunctory performance, snide remarks. Without treatment, the grumbling grows and bad attitudes spread, quickly infecting a work team like a virus. If left to fester, everyone will feel the effects of low morale, work errors, and performance decline.

Negativity can creep into a workplace and then go viral, but here’s good news: Unlike the common cold, there’s a cure.

**Know the Signs**

Gripes and conflicts occur in every setting, and complaints and frustration on the job aren’t always bad. Having someone play “devil’s advocate” can open your eyes to potential problems or new ideas. Your managerial goal isn’t to purge all negative thoughts from the workplace. The negativity you should disinfect is the kind that forecasts doom and gloom but does nothing to help you eliminate it.

Recognizing the warning signs of low morale allows you to track down the contagion and prevent pessimism from infecting your team. Pay attention to these indicators:

- Increased complaining
- Lack of hope that things will get better
- Tendency to blame rather than problem-solve
- Rigid approaches or unwillingness to change, even for the better
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Rumor spreading and gossip

Ignoring negativity allows it to grow and harms both your employees’ and your organization’s wellbeing. Gallup analysis shows that even small shifts in an employee’s wellbeing can make a big impact on performance and productivity. Poor wellbeing, however, is linked to anxiety, depression, absenteeism, and ‘presenteeism;’ or when a person shows up for work but isn’t involved or engaged. A person who feels positive is more likely to avoid errors, come up with a new idea, solve a complex problem, and go the extra mile to complete a task.

As a manager, you have an opportunity to flip negativity into constructive change. Acknowledge setbacks — and then turn them around. Consider the alternative responses and outcomes in these scenarios:

- **Max** is a “glass-half-empty” kind of guy who tends to point out the downside of every situation. When his team begins using a new process, he declares that the old way was better and that the new way will never work. When things go wrong, he blames the problem on the new process and gripes about it to coworkers and customers. They commiserate with him. In response, Max’s manager could dismiss the complaints, point out Max’s errors, and tell him to be more diligent. Max will likely complain more, feel distracted at work and make mistakes that delay projects, burden coworkers, and upset customers.

Alternatively, Max’s manager could ask him to clarify why he thinks the new process won’t work and invite Max to describe potential issues and factors that can help the process succeed. By not dismissing what Max has to say and asking for clarification, the manager can help Max focus on the positives and prevents “negativity damage.”

- Company Z considers selling one of its low-performing divisions. To make the division more attractive to potential buyers, it needs to increase net income. In response, Company Z’s leaders could announce spending cuts on new supplies, scale back the annual employee picnic, and reduce bonus payments. Managers might not share the reasons for the spending restrictions with associates or ask for their ideas. Employees who won’t know what’s going on may speculate about Company Z’s future and worry about pay cuts, transfers, and job loss. Morale will plunge as rumors spread.

As an alternative, Company Z’s leaders could hold staff meetings to describe potential plans and solicit suggestions for cutting costs. Managers might brainstorm with their teams on ways to trim spending and conserve resources. Associates from various departments could be asked to summarize such discussions for distribution to the staff so that viable suggestions can be implemented. This way employees can feel involved and invested in the final plan, reducing the natural negativity that can follow “worst case scenario” speculation when
Involving and acknowledging employees’ attitudes and emotions benefit an organization’s quality control, customer service, innovation, and employee retention. People feel better — and work better — when they sense leadership support, recognition, and ongoing communication from their superiors. As a manager, the remedy for workplace negativity is in your hands.

Start the Healing

Bad things are bound to happen from time to time, and it’s okay for employees to react by feeling angry or frustrated. Your approach to an unpleasant situation can help your staff deal with stress in a productive way and stop negativity from spreading. Survive an outbreak of negativity with a dose of positivity. Try this prescription:

**Dispense accurate information.**

Provide employees with straightforward information and facts. Use newsletters, email blasts, and informal channels of communication such as spontaneous meetings, lunch gatherings and social media to get the right messages to workers. Even if the news is negative, provide clear and honest communication.

**Make house calls.**

Let employees know they have a place to go with concerns and questions, so they will not turn to the grapevine for information. Check in with your team on a regular basis to uncover concerns and potential problems. Conduct weekly round robins, in which employees have 30 seconds to update top priorities for that week. Ask for opinions and feedback, show respect for other points of view, and follow through on suggestions. Developing trust will increase comfort levels and strengthen relationships.

**Take a timeout.**

Accept negativity from time to time, but set limits. For example, give staff permission to rant freely to co-workers during a “bad mood break,” but the negativity stops when work begins. Or, prescribe 3 minutes of complaining to colleagues, followed by a mind-clearing walk together. Exercise is good medicine: It relieves tension, clears the mind, and improves a mood.

**Collaborate on a cure.**

Acknowledge setbacks and find ways to turn them around. Avoid getting into arguments. Instead, ask plenty of questions that encourage a complainer to be specific so you can get to the root of the problem. Point out areas of agreement and look for solutions together.

**Negativity Triage**

Despite your efforts, you may encounter an employee who persistently exhibits pessimistic or uncooperative behavior. Attitudes and behaviors are solely the responsibility and obligation of the individual, but you can promote productive participation through:

**Empowerment.**

Provide opportunities for the naysayer to make decisions about, control or influence his own job. Enable her to improve the situation, resolve problems, and make good events happen again.

**Evenhandedness.**

Treat everyone — even nags and complainers — with fairness and consistency. Develop and publicize workplace policies and procedures use the same standards across-the-board.

**Inclusivity.**

Help the person feel like a member of the in-crowd. Each person wants to have the same information as others. Provide the context for decisions, and communicate effectively and constantly.

The Best Medicine? Prevention!

The most effective course of therapy for negativity is to prevent it from occurring in the first place. Keep bad attitudes in check and resuscitate your team’s positive thoughts and feelings with these safeguards:

**Boost immunity.**

Post certificates, awards, or letters from pleased customers on the walls. Consider creative ways that the work environment can be aesthetically pleasing and reflective of caring and pride. Recognize employees by calling out their achievements in person, through your intranet, or at a staff meeting. A Virgin Pulse survey of 1,000 full-time U.S. employees found that the major drivers of job satisfaction are feeling appreciated, supported, and part of something exciting and challenging.

**See silver linings.**

When something goes wrong, remind everyone that things frequently go well, and you’ve overcome difficult situations before. Look at complaints and conflicts as opportunities for positive change. Find humor or give a pep talk. Reach for positive thoughts like, “We will solve this problem together.”

**Invest in a healthy team.**

Afford all employees the potential to grow, develop, and feel connected to their work. Replenish your people with training and opportunity for promotions or lateral movement. Encourage their healthy habits so they feel good on and off the job. Get your team committed to the organization’s mission, values and goals. When people understand their part in making desired outcomes happen, they can effectively contribute more.

Like bad colds, bad attitudes spread quickly — but so do enthusiasm and positivity. Making an effort to prevent negativity and nurture positive emotions among your associates will keep their confidence intact and productivity strong.

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