

Managing negativity in the workplace



Nothing affects employee morale more insidiously than persistent negativity. It saps the energy of the entire organisation and diverts critical attention from work and performance.

Negativity can occur in the attitude, outlook and talk of one department member, or in a crescendo of choices responding to a decision or event. As a manager, you may be in touch with employees throughout the company. This would allow you to sense workplace negativity.

You may receive employee complaints, hold exit interviews with employees who leave, and know the reputation of your company in your community. You might watch the discussions on employee intranets, manage the staff appraisal, and coach managers in appropriate staff treatment. All of this could help you to identify the symptoms of negativity before its morale-busting consequences damage your workplace. Action is required before it becomes a company trait.

What can you do?

Set up an internal communication system or blog where staff can air their views. Allow employees to maintain anonymity, as they will then be more apt to say things they wouldn't say in meetings.

As much as you don't want to hear the message, it's important that you do – and don't shoot the messenger. If employees are sending negative messages on an Intranet, they are actually saying these things to each other in real-time. Listen – it's your best way to determine the action that should be taken.

- Try not to get angry about negativity. Rather find the root cause. Employees who feel “powerless” in situations often try to regain power by making other staff members negative – or getting them to “take sides”.
- If a staff member is known to be unhappy, call them into your office and talk generally about what is happening in their department, or their lives. Tell them they are valued by the company, and ask if there is anything in particular making them unhappy.

- Be an example. If you talk in negative terms – “the economy is bad for business”, “this product will never work” – you can't expect your staff members to be positive.

“Positive” can spread as quickly as “negative” – and have an inversely proportionate effect on your company. Encourage positive talk, use it yourself, and give recognition where it is due.

Handling office conflict

- Resolve it behind closed doors.
- Stay calm.
- Listen attentively.
- Don't personalise disagreements.
- Stick to the facts and state your case clearly.
- Deal with one topic at a time.
- Be brief and specific.
- Know your limitations.
- Say “thank you” for agreeing to work out the issue with you.

Unresolved conflict can have negative effects on you and your organisation, and it doesn't just go away.

The cost of resolving it is negligible compared to the cost of reduced productivity, high staff turnover and increased stress.

Knowing how to handle conflict effectively could enhance your problem solving skills and creativity, and facilitate growth. Effective conflict management will not only help you minimise negativity, but can also help you further your career.