

Workplace Negativity - Beware... It's Contagious **By Marcel Faggioni**

Workplace Negativity is analogous to a virulent infection which spreads from one employee to another. An employee may either bring the virus to the workplace or may become infected by it from another employee or from the organization. This workplace pathogen is highly contagious and can infect many employees in a very silent manner... There are no physical manifestations, since negativity is caused by an attitude virus.

Negativity is an attitudinal manifestation, which may be prevalent in certain thoughts, moods, behaviours or actions/inactions. Exposure to too many unchecked negative behaviours by colleagues will result in the negativity virus being spread more easily.

- Management literature points to a number of adverse effects on an organization. Some of these are the following:
 - Increased client/customer complaints
 - Increased error rates
 - Reduction in quality of services or goods
 - Increased employee turnover
 - Increased absenteeism and lateness
 - Increased interpersonal conflicts between colleagues
 - Lower morale and motivation
 - Lower overall productivity
 - Loss of organizational loyalty
 - Loss of creativity and initiative

According to one renowned expert in this field, the negativity virus thrives under the following elements:

- ◆ **Lack or loss of competence**
 - Real or perceived loss of competence erodes confidence, which leads to reduced levels of self-esteem, thus the greater likelihood of developing a negative attitude
- ◆ **Lack or loss of community/association**
 - Loss of work colleagues due to reorganization, downsizing causes some disconnect for many employees left behind, thereby increasing feeling of negativity
- ◆ **Lack or loss of personal control**
 - Lack of involvement in the decision-making that affects one's position leads to reduced commitment and loyalty and increased resentment

How is negativity communicated in the workplace:

- ◆ **Spoken word**

- The following statements communicate negativity and encourages others to follow suit:

“It will never work.”

“I can’t believe that the agency has undertaken a continuous quality improvement program! It’s just another flavour of the month!”

“It can’t be done!”

“This unit is all messed up because management doesn’t know what they’re doing.”

- ◆ **Nonverbal Communication**

- Facial expression such as frowns, lack of eye contact, crossed arm, poor posture often reflect negativity.

“When the eyes say one thing, and the tongue another, a practical person relies on the language of the first.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

- ◆ **Vocal Sounds or paralanguage**

- This form of communication deals with the manner in which we speak, which includes volume; intonation; frequency (how often we speak), pronunciation, emphasis and accent. For instance, a person who whines is often considered a complainer with a negative attitude.

Some would argue that negativity is a nasty “habit”. In other words, negativity is a behaviour that is done automatically without thinking about it... it simply just happens! Negativity is how one normally reacts to life. Negativity often arises as a mechanism in dealing with stress, anxiety, depression, annoyance, anger or disappointment. If negativity is a habit, the best way to effectively reduce or eliminate negativity is to have people transform their negative habits into positive ones... As an organization, it is important that the negativity virus be kept under control and contained. If not kept in check, the negativity becomes the norm (sub-culture) within an organizational setting.

From an organizational perspective, the following strategies may help in the containment of the negativity virus:

- Recognize that an negative attitude problem exists;
- Acknowledge any underlying causes for the negative attitude;
- Help the negative individual take responsibility;
- Substitute negative, inappropriate reactions with different more acceptable ones;
- Instill positive attitudes in others.

By being proactive and taking the above steps to eradicate the negativity virus, the sub-culture within the organization is able to maintain its stability in terms of promoting a genuinely positive and productive working atmosphere. The goal is to eliminate any viral infestation of negativity before such a virus has time to fester and manifest itself as the ugly monster that it represents. The elimination of the virus liberates the organization to strive toward its true potential without the constant worry of being stuck in a rut.