

Avoiding Negativity in the Workplace

by Alyce Duckworth, LCSW

Supervisor, Prince St. Academy, Arapahoe/Douglas Mental Health Network

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Let's face it. Every workplace, no matter what type, experiences negativity to some degree. Whether the negativity consists of gossip around the proverbial water cooler, overt sabotage of workplace goals or a combination of sources across this continuum, negativity is often a tremendous force to be reckoned with. I often envision negativity as a highly contagious substance that can take on a life of its own in a short period of time, much like the Blob in the 1958 Horror film of the same name. Unfortunately, it doesn't take much for the blob to grow larger and move faster. Although some of us are more susceptible to being overcome by negativity, thereby becoming carriers of it ourselves, I'm listing some suggestions for minimizing the impact of negativity in the workplace individually and, subsequently, throughout the larger system:

- Limit your exposure to negativity, pessimism, and gossip. Repeated exposure to these three can discourage the most optimistic individuals. Simply walking away when conversations move toward the negative is often the most effective way of limiting exposure to discouraging material. If you feel you must excuse yourself from the situation, a simple explanation of getting back to work is often sufficient.
- Don't feed in. Most individuals who have pessimistic outlooks on life look for similar-minded individuals with whom they can commiserate. When interacting with individuals such as these, even passive listening can seem like agreement or even encouragement to continue. It's best just to remove yourself completely from the situation. Most pessimistic individuals will get the hint after you have removed yourself from negative talk two or three times.
- Don't be a carrier. Pessimism, negativity, and gossip are spread, much like a virus, from person to person. The negative three require that you carry them from one person or group to the next. By intentionally refusing to repeat negative material, we take ourselves out of the middle man loop and end that particular cycle.
- Turn gossip around. The things we say about others can be positive or negative. The unfortunate part of gossip is that it is overwhelmingly negative. It can be fun, however, to spread happy (but true) gossip, such as, "I heard Kim broke a productivity record this month - that's awesome," or, "Kenya is always in such high spirits, she lifts the morale of the whole team." Enough positive statements, even in the form of heartfelt compliments,

can begin to counteract negativity. Again, remove yourself from the conversation if a more pessimistic participant attempts to turn things in a negative direction.

- Be a problem-solver. Managers are much more impressed by positive solution-oriented attitudes in employees. When speaking in front of a boss, if you MUST complain, always offer one or two potential solutions. If you are in a position in which you could be promoted or given a raise, managers are much more likely to consider you as a candidate when you have demonstrated an enthusiastic solution-oriented pattern. Managers also appreciate a few nods to what is going really well on occasion. Honest feedback on the positives of a workplace can cause you to stand out in an employer's eyes, in the midst of the daily deluge of complaints.
- Use mindfulness strategies. There is a great deal of mindfulness (living in the moment) literature available in various forms. One of the key tenets of being mindful is realizing that you can be part of an emotional environment (e.g. stressful) without being compelled to react in a certain manner (e.g. actually being stressed). Being an initially unwilling collector of rubber ducks due to my last name, I like to use the duck metaphor: Imagine the stress and negativity rolling right off of you as if you were a duck in the rain. You don't have to choose to be affected by negativity in your work environment.

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