

October 2014
Page 1



Overcoming ‘Negative Vibes’ Among Your Staff: 10 Tips

Every HR pro and manager has to deal with a certain amount of pessimistic, hostile or uncooperative behavior at times. It’s just part of the workplace. But a hard-core negative attitude that starts with just one employee can quickly infect an entire department (or sometimes a whole company) if you don’t rein it in quickly. The ugly result: A workplace that’s rife with backstabbing, gossiping and rebellious employees. Cal Butera, the editor of *Business Management Daily’s Office Manager Today and Manager’s Legal Bulletin* newsletters, provides the top 10 tips for confronting employees whose negative behavior has begun to affect co-workers and the company.

1. Don’t get drawn into the employees’ negative mind-set. Listen to their points, but don’t temper your own realistic optimism.
2. Avoid getting into an argument. Negative people thrive on the negative energy of arguments. Point out areas of agreement when possible in order to build rapport. Keep your cool.
3. Set standards. Spell out the consequences of negative behavior, such as decreased morale. Base them on behavior, not attitude. For example, you may not be able to change the fact that an employee doesn’t like a certain company policy. But you can discipline employees if they don’t follow the policy or are insubordinate in gossiping about it.
4. Ask questions. Force the employee to be specific about what is creating his or her negative thoughts and actions.
5. Try role-playing. Ask the employee to put himself in your shoes and pretend he has been asked to resolve the problem. That way, you will have the employee contribute his ideas for the best possible solutions. Involving the employee may also lead to more positive feelings about the solution or outcome since he or she had a hand in creating it.
6. Listen carefully. Use active listening to ensure that you’re understanding the employee correctly.
7. Don’t lower your expectations of the employee. A negative attitude doesn’t necessarily mean a poor performer.
8. Empower employees. Stop the “victim” mentality from forming. Allow employees to take responsibility for “good” events, so they can make them happen again, and for the “bad” events, so they have the power to change them in the future.
9. Solicit feedback. Always ask for employees’ opinions before making major decisions that will affect them. The more you listen to employees, and take an active interest in their concerns, the less likely they will be to complain to each other.
10. Hire right. Identify negative people before they’re hired. During the interview, listen for feelings that “life isn’t fair” in response to questions like: Have you ever felt you’ve been treated unfairly in the past? What were your chief concerns about management in your previous jobs? and What would you have changed if you were the manager at your last job?

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How to Handle the Pressure of Being a Supervisor/Manager



Most supervisors and managers are confronted with stress and pressure on a daily basis. Whether it's dealing with employee problems, changes in the workplace, or balancing competing priorities at work and home, being in a leadership role today brings a consistent array of challenges.

For supervisors and managers, pressure comes with the territory. Learning how to effectively respond to it is the key to success. Below are several strategies for responding effectively to the stress and pressure you face as a leader:

- *Maintain a positive attitude* – A positive attitude starts with how you choose to perceive the challenging situations that confront you. Do you face them with a healthy mindset expecting that everything will work out, or do you allow yourselves to get negative and complain when things aren't going your way? Also, when you stay positive in your approach to a problem or challenge, you'll be more apt to take the steps that increase the likelihood of a positive outcome.
- *Manage your emotions, instead of letting your emotions manage you* – When you're confronted with stress or pressure, it's normal to feel strong emotions such as impatience, frustration, anger, fear, etc. The key is to be aware of your feelings, and manage them well so that you don't overreact emotionally.

One effective self-management strategy is to take a step back when you feel particularly emotional in response to a situation. This could include putting off a meeting or interaction, asking someone on the telephone if you can call them back, or even sleeping on something before you respond to it. Stepping back provides the opportunity to calm down and get your thoughts together so that you can respond rationally.

- *Build up your resilience* – When you keep your life in balance, manage your stress well, and get enough sleep, you will generally have a greater ability to cope with the pressure that comes your way. Build up your resilience daily by connecting with people that you care about, doing things that you enjoy, and remembering to exercise. Taking good care of yourself will help to keep your mind and body primed to deal effectively with challenging situations.

By:
Greg Brannan
Director of Business Development & Training Consultant
Deer Oaks EAP Services, LLC



Ask Your EAP!

The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.

Q. How can supervisors help employees maintain a positive mental attitude?

A. If you have a good working relationship with your employees, you can play a constructive role in influencing their positive mental attitude by blending positivity into your supervision style. Here are some ideas: 1) When coaching, remind employees of their capacity to achieve so they “buy in” to their own potential. 2) Encourage employees to embrace personal growth opportunities within the organization and the community. 3) Encourage employees to take chances and think big when it comes to pursuing their goals. 4) When crises occur, model calmness, coolness, and a level-headed response. 5) Encourage employees to develop their passions and find the professional niche that matches their talents and values. 6) Model hope and optimism when the going gets tough. 7) Interrupt negative self-talk and reassure your employees that they have what it takes to win, which will reduce their self-doubt. 8) Encourage employees to “smell the roses” and pursue work-life balance.

Q. My employee has been with our organization for a long time. He refuses many assigned duties as well as some that are part of the job description. I don't think anyone in management is willing to consider termination. They want me to “fix” the problem, but I have no leverage. Now what?

A. Simply put, it appears as though you are unable to direct the employee's work. If true, then you have lost control of the employment relationship. Troubled employees who have gained this sort of leverage over their employers create a lot of risk. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon. Entitlement thinking may lead to bossing coworkers, bullying fellow employees, breaking work rules, end-running managers, and using company property for personal business. Fear of the employee's reaction to confrontation and adapting to avoid it ultimately created this personnel issue. Start by making a formal referral to the EAP. Document the poor cooperation, work refusal, etc. Regardless of whether the employee accepts the referral, you may still meet and consult with the EAP; you may even choose to involve your manager in this meeting. Discuss a concrete action plan. In matters of this type, management teams that focus on a solution usually decide to draw a line and insist on change. The good part is that most are pleasantly surprised at how easily the employee turns around!

Q. Can you give me a checklist for counseling employees about their performance to reduce the likelihood that I will leave something out, allowing the employee to manipulate me by saying some element of our discussion was omitted?

A. Try the following checklist: First, ask the employee how things are going, and whether he or she is having any difficulty with assignments. You'll be surprised at the self-awareness. Next, discuss your concern, and any discrepancy between what you've observed and the employee's self-assessment. Then, tell the employee exactly what expected outcome or result must be achieved. Discuss specific examples of the performance issue in question and how it can be corrected. Before ending the meeting, ask your employee whether he or she understands what needs to be accomplished. Failure to make this clarification will lead to a claim that confusion existed at the end of your meeting. Note: Prior to your meeting, consider your employee's essential duties and performance standards. Are they reasonable? Clarify and affirm that expectations are reasonable, and advocate or make changes, as needed. Also, don't forget to make the EAP a key part of your supervisor's toolbox.

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