

Negativity at Work: Strategies for Protecting Your Peace and Productivity

Forbes | Hugh Breland | July 17, 2025



getty

We've all likely encountered negative people in our workplaces—those who consistently criticize but rarely contribute constructively. The ripple effects of their negativity can profoundly impact team morale and productivity while draining mental health.

According to research highlighted by Harvard Business Review, just seeing someone who is stressed can trigger cortisol production. Cortisol is a stress hormone, and chronic stress can negatively affect workplace effectiveness.

Conversely, positive interactions can enhance collaboration and trust.

Spotting Negative Influence

Negative colleagues often:

- Prioritize criticism over solutions.
- Focus on limitations rather than possibilities.

- Place personal preferences above team progress.
- Habitually assume the worst about situations and individuals.

Ineffective Responses To Avoid

- Attack Mode: Reacting emotionally by engaging in conflict can escalate tension rather than resolve it.
- Fix Mode: Attempting to fix another person's attitude or life situations sets unrealistic expectations and can foster frustration.

Remember, it's not your responsibility to resolve others' negativity; attempting this often leads to disappointment and burnout.

Constructive Strategies For Managing Negativity

1. Practice empathy and understanding.

Negative behaviors often stem from underlying stress or personal struggles. Before responding, consider: Could there be something deeper affecting this person's behavior? An empathetic approach often defuses hostility and fosters openness.

For instance, I had a reliable executive team member suddenly start missing deadlines and acting unusually defensive. So, I intentionally went by the individual's office and said: "I've noticed you've seemed a little extra stressed lately. Is everything okay, or is there something I can support you with?" My hope/goal was to signal genuine concern and provide a pathway toward opening up about below the surface issues—like feeling overwhelmed by workload, pressure from unforeseen internal stakeholders or outside personal stressors.

Strategies I've found particularly effective in defusing hostility include:

- In-Person Communication: Address issues face to face, one on one.
- Active Listening: Allow space to share without interruption, validating emotions—not necessarily agreeing with/co-signing on behavior.
- Tangible Support: Offer access to wellness or counseling resources, allow adjusted hours or temporary redistribution of responsibilities or arrange targeted skills training/mentorship to build confidence and increase wins.

2. Provide missing context when appropriate.

Sometimes negativity arises from misinformation or misunderstandings. Gently offering clarity with statements like, "Can I share some information you might not have?" helps reshape perspectives constructively.

3. Set clear boundaries.

Define limits on your availability and emotional investment in consistently negative interactions. If someone's negativity drains your energy, minimize one-on-one engagements and try to meet in group settings when interaction is necessary.

For instance, I've had colleagues who regularly vented frustrations without seeking solutions. The pattern I noticed was that these conversations were draining my mental and emotional energy, which impacted my productivity. To address this, I respectfully set boundaries.

First, I made "permission to play" crystal clear among all—specifically, making clear that frustrations and complaints are always passed up, not over or down. And, letting team members know that when you share frustrations, present a potential solution. By agreeing to these terms as a team, I am able to reference them in one-on-one meetings and gently redirect conversations toward constructive, solution-oriented discussions.

Protecting Your Mental Environment

Allowing negativity to dominate your workspace can normalize toxic behaviors and diminish team effectiveness. Avoid internalizing harmful feedback, and try to consciously release negative interactions.

Evaluate your expectations: Frequently, disappointment arises from the gap between our expectations and reality. Recognizing and adjusting these expectations can help foster resilience.

Building A Culture Of Positivity And Accountability

Leadership plays a critical role. Encourage environments where positivity and constructive criticism are the norm. Promote open communication, empathy and proactive problem-solving, setting a powerful example for teams to emulate.

I've been asked to spearhead culture transformations, cultivating positivity and constructive criticism, at multiple companies. Regular, tailored recognition and structured feedback loops are key. I would add that culture is not something to be controlled. It can be influenced and should evolve over time.

That said, here are some examples: We implemented a weekly moment during our team huddles called "High and Hard," where each team member shares a recent win and a constructive insight, lesson learned or uphill struggle. In tandem, I personally make it a priority to publicly and regularly celebrate individuals. Taking from the NFL's "Game Ball" locker room celebrations, I have found it fun and effective to do the "Gum Ball" award following wins.

We also introduced monthly peer-to-peer shout-outs, invited our employees to be strategically featured on our podcast/social content and recently named a conference room "The 1983 Room" after an employee who had been serving the organization since 1983.

These deliberate practices create an environment where recognition feels authentic, criticism is productive rather than punitive and positivity naturally thrives—we like to say, encouragement is contagious.

Lastly, provide regular training to equip your team with effective conflict resolution skills and emotional intelligence, ensuring everyone feels valued and supported. Prioritizing emotional well-being can create resilient teams capable of navigating challenges effectively, promoting sustainable productivity and a harmonious environment.

Final Thoughts

Effectively navigating negative people isn't about eliminating negativity but managing your responses thoughtfully and strategically. Doing so can help preserve your peace, enhance productivity and build healthier cultures.

Ultimately, focusing on solutions rather than problems allows both individuals and teams to flourish despite inevitable interpersonal challenges. Stay committed to collective progress. Be encouraged; there is a path to life-giving work environments.