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Absolutely. Positively. Uplifting.

“Create the outcomes you want. Regardless of the circumstances.”

How to Handle the Inevitable Negative Co-Worker

In just about every workshop I present, someone describes a co-worker with a bad attitude: one who constantly complains, puts others' ideas down, or just makes everyone else miserable. The comments usually set a buzz around the room—because everyone has had to deal with negative people who bring them down. So, what can you do when other people sap your positive energy?

Let me assure you that you are not imagining the impact of a co-worker's bad attitude on you. Negativity, depression and unhappiness are all contagious. Several years ago, Wharton (University of Pennsylvania) Management Associate Professor Sigal Barsade conducted an experiment. She had groups of students act as managers trying to agree how to divide up a fixed sum of bonus money among their employees. Unbeknownst to the groups, one of the participants was a drama student named Rick, who had been trained to act out a different mood with each group. In the groups where he exuded negativity, the other participants took on his bad mood, and as a result behaved less cooperatively.

Now for the silver lining. *Positive emotions are as contagious as negative ones.* Back to the Wharton experiment—it turns out that when Rick acted calm and happy, the rest of the group was pleasant and cooperative. “I was in the room,” recalls Barsade, “and it was palpable: you could just see the emotions being transferred among the students.” Barsade's conclusion: the more positive the emotion, the more the cooperation and the less the conflict.

So, how can you apply the findings from this research to your work situation? First, keep in mind that you cannot **make** anyone else more positive. This would be operating in what I call the “no control zone.” The reality is you cannot change another person's thoughts, feelings or behaviors.

But what we do know from this research is that you can **influence** their emotions by being positive yourself. You act from the “influence zone” when you adopt a positive outlook, steer conversations away from complaints and griping and show the other person what's possible by your positive attitude. Will your co-worker change? Maybe, and maybe not. When you operate from the “influence zone,” you need to let go of the outcome. Instead of focusing on changing your co-worker's attitude, focus on keeping your attitude positive.

Finally, remember that it is possible to stay positive in the face of someone else's negative mood. This is your “control zone.” The trick is to be aware of your own thinking. You don't have to buy into negativity. When your co-worker is complaining, think to yourself, “What's up with him (or her?) What's his/her problem?” Then think of something that makes you feel good. Keep your mood positive inside regardless of what is happening outside. By staying aware of what is happening, you are no longer at the mercy of your co-worker's attitude. With awareness, you choose how you want to think, feel and behave. You are, indeed, a POWER Optimist!