

SMALL BUSINESS SUCCESS



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Handling Workplace Negativity

Nothing impacts employee morale more powerfully than negativity in the workplace. Negativity can be manifested loudly (by those who make their thoughts clearly and rudely known to all who will listen), or quietly (by those who speak negatively behind the backs of their co-workers). However it happens, if it is not dealt with swiftly and confidently, it will eventually destroy your team, reduce efficiency and productivity, and cause valuable staff members to seek employment elsewhere. Whether you have a small staff of 2 or 3, or are managing a larger group - nipping negativity in the bud will bring huge benefits to your business. Letting it linger will bring you more trouble than you want to handle.

Recognizing the Signs

How do you know if negativity is a problem in your company? First you need to understand what negativity is and where it comes from. A Management Review article (1998) states that negativity is most often a result of a loss of confidence, control or community. People don't generally set out to be negative, but when pushed with a fear of loss or control, they exhibit fight or flight behaviours. You can usually identify the 'fighters' fairly easily, but you might have to look a little harder for the 'flighters'. This is particularly important if those people who cannot express themselves in the workplace, take to complaining about your company around town.

Say Betty in your accounting department made a huge mistake with the financial statements last month. She may try to cope with her loss of confidence by blaming her mistake on the bookkeeper and gossiping about her incompetence. Or what about Bob - head of Marketing? He's heard rumours that the company is downsizing and that his position may be on the chopping block. Suddenly he turns into a tyrant, demanding absolute perfection from his department so he can look good to his superiors and protect his position. And then there's Martha, the receptionist, who hasn't been feeling very valued lately, so she quietly collects information on what's going on with various staff

members and then shares her juicy secrets with others in the workplace so she can feel important.

Chances are, if negativity is floating through your workplace, you've heard rumblings or whispers, seen bullying behaviours, or noticed discontent in your staff. Workplace negativity always results in a breakdown of the team, and that may be your first clue that something is amiss. Some other clues are a decline in productivity or work quality from otherwise dependable employees, shifts in relationships (who hangs out with who in the staff room), a marked consistent change in behaviours, or a growing dissention at staff meetings.

If you've identified some of the signs of negativity, here are a few strategies to get things back on track.

Open the Lines of Communication - Make sure you provide opportunities for people to express their feelings about what's going on in the workplace. Regular staff meetings, or if you have a small staff, regular one-on-one meetings with them, can be a great place to start. If people feel they will be heard and that their feelings will be respected, they will channel their energies toward positive communication rather than negativity.

Reward People for Being Positive - It's easy for managers to get caught up in only addressing the things that are going wrong in an organization. It's the urgent squeezing out the important. Make sure people know you notice their efforts to be positive. Have a monthly "positivity" award, take someone aside and let them know you appreciate their positive contribution, or better yet, let others in your office know someone has done something good.

Deal with the Troublemakers Quickly - If you've identified some of the behaviours listed above in your workplace, you need to take a hard line against the negativity it is perpetuating among your staff. Take the negative person aside and clearly address how their behaviour is affecting your workplace, and how you expect their behaviour to change. Give a timeline and then meet with them again. Reward positive changes and reiterate your expectations if changes have not taken place. If negativity persists you may need to make a tough decision about whether to keep that person on. The damage they do may outweigh the value they provide. If your staff sees you taking a zero-tolerance stand on workplace negativity, they will think twice about how they behave.

Lead by Example - If you want a positive workplace, you need to be a positive leader. You can't expect your staff to treat each other with kindness and respect if you're not doing the same. You can't expect them not to gossip if you're talking about people behind their backs (even if it's customers). Strong leadership shows through what you do more than what you say. Demonstrate the behaviours you want to see.



Workplace negativity is not inevitable. By watching for the signs and making an effort to deal with the things you see, you can create a positive work environment where mutual respect is the law and negativity doesn't find a place to stand.

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Beating Burnout Before it Begins

Running your business is often more than a full time job. As a result, it is common for small business owners' lives to become unbalanced, where work takes over every other thing. If you find yourself stressed out, burned out, or worn out, take a moment to assess your total health picture - the physical, spiritual, social and psychological aspects of who you are. There is a cost associated with overwork. The trouble is, we usually don't realize how much it will cost until the cost is too much. Given that the stress of running a small business will always exist, it's important that you recognize your limits and be proactive about preventing burnout. What would happen if you crashed, and weren't there to oversee things for six months? To avoid that scenario, watch for the physical and emotional signs that things are getting out of control - an inability to keep your emotions in check, sleepless nights, panic episodes, irritability, depression, or an inability to cope with daily stress. Beating burnout requires preventative action. Here are some things to think about.

Decide What's Important to You - if meeting your sales quotas each month is more important than spending time with your family, you must choose to delegate your time accordingly. Unfortunately, most of us say our families and our health are more important than the bottom line, but don't make the necessary changes to incorporate that belief. Deciding what's important to you will assist you in adjusting your work schedule to make sure the things you value are receiving the right amount of attention.

Learn to Say No - people who are successful usually say yes a lot, but the people who are successful and wise, also learn when to say no. Adding other activities to your life may get you further ahead faster, but in the big picture of what's important to you, does it matter if it takes a little longer to get there if it means spending time on what you value?

Ask for Help - small business owners are notorious for feeling as if they need to do it all, or that they're the only ones who can do it. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, but rather a sign of wisdom and strength. Realize when you've reached your limit and then give things away. Delegate. Ask others to assist you with difficult tasks. You are capable, but letting others help means you can choose to focus on what's important to you. You may also be surprised how much you will benefit from allowing others to grow through those opportunities



Simplify Your Life - the more you have, the more you have to worry about, to store, clean or fix. Routinely get rid of things you don't use and/or don't need. Reduce the clutter both at home and at work. Reduce the clutter in terms of your commitments. Do you really need to be involved in all those things? Take a deep breath and enjoy the peace of a simplified life.

Take Time Off Regularly - working seven days a week will kill you - eventually. Everyone needs a break -

including you! Even if your business requires you to work weekends, make sure you're taking adequate breaks so that your body and mind can rejuvenate. It will make you better able to manage things when you get back.

Remember People - relationships are more important than any activity you can do. Spend time with the people who mean the most to you. No one at the end of life has ever said they wished they'd spent more time at the office.

Make a Spiritual Connection - it is proven that spirituality enhances a person's peace of mind, and quality of life. Whatever that means for you, find a way to make a spiritual connection and to incorporate those beliefs into your daily living.

Seek Professional Help - when it becomes obvious you are not able to manage the things in your life, don't avoid seeking help from a professional. Whether it's a psychologist or counselor, your doctor, or a business or financial advisor - know when you're in over your head and get the help you need to get back on track.

Doing these things BEFORE you hit burnout, may prevent it from happening all together. But doing them when you realize you're headed for burnout is imperative if you want to avoid a situation where, physically or emotionally, you can't go on.

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Brainstorm for Better Ideas

Ever been stuck on an idea that just won't take flight? Need a new direction for a product or

service but can't seem to get the right one? All of us from time to time get what is the equivalent of "writer's block" to a business person, but what can we do to overcome it and launch into a creative solution to the problem we're facing? Brainstorming is one of the best idea generators you can use to move from stuck to stupendous! The purpose of brainstorming is to generate as many ideas as possible. Brainstorming is highly effective when done with your staff. It fosters teamwork and a sense of belonging and will strengthen your team in addition to generating great ideas. If you're running a small or one-person business, grab some friends or family, or other business associates, and plan a brainstorming session. Pick a night, order pizza and let loose. You'll be amazed at the synergy brainstorming can produce.

There are typically three phases to brainstorming, but you can use what works for you, and don't stop until you've achieved your desired result.

Phase I

Determine the topic you want to explore. A possible topic could be "Ways to Improve Customer Service". Assign one person to be the scribe and have plenty of paper or white board space available. Assign a specific amount of time (15-20 minutes is usually sufficient). Agree on the rules of the brainstorming session. They should be simple and few but if the group gets off track, you can remind them of the agreed upon rules. An example could be:

- * No discussion - just ideas (quantity not quality at this stage)
- * No judgments of any idea presented (save this for phase III)
- * No expansion or explanation of the idea (at this stage)
- * One idea can generate another idea (this is called hitchhiking and it works great)

After the rules are set, allow the group to generate words or phrases that come to mind on the topic you have presented. One way is to use post it notes: people write their ideas down in a few words and stick the note on a wall or white board. Stop the group at the appropriate time - even if ideas are still flowing - and take a break. Come back again, change the scribe (if you are using one) and go for another fifteen minutes. If ideas are still coming break again and do this for a third time. The important thing is getting all the ideas down.



Phase II

Now, the group's task is to take the ideas and organize them. Come up with some general categories that the ideas can fit under, and begin recording each idea under the proper heading. For the topic of Customer Service, your categories might be: Warranties, Incentives, Personal Touch, Value-Added Items, Events . . . and so on. If you are using post it notes you can rearrange them on the wall in columns. You'll find some ideas are similar but worded differently. Try combining them into one thought, but ask the two people who provided the ideas to do this so both of their

thoughts are accurately represented.

Phase III

In this phase, the group's task is to examine the ideas. Discard any ideas that are not feasible, practical, or are beyond the scope of the topic. Throw out ideas that are contradictory (or leave them in a separate place and brainstorm them at another time). With what's remaining, organize the ideas in order of importance, feasibility, and affordability. Once you have this list, the group should

