

Negative Employees at Work? Turn Complainers into Explainers!

Tired of the whiners, complainers, gripers, and groaners in your workplace? Negative employees are an all-too-common anchor around the neck of too many work teams.

Some studies suggest that about 70% of all conflicts in the workplace are based not on what people are saying, but how they say things. Moreover, it is estimated that in the typical workplace there are ten negative (“squawking seagull language”) comments to every one positive comment.

And it gets worse! Negative comments are thought to have five times the power of every positive comment – their impact is felt even more potently.

After a decade of research on high and low performing teams, Marcial Losada found that 2.9013 is the ratio of positive to negative emotions necessary to make a corporate team successful. (Now that’s a rather specific number...you’re probably safe to round it off to three!) This 3:1 ratio of positive to negative comments is known as the “Losada line.” And, ideally, Losada’s research found, if your workplace can boost the ratio to 6:1, the likelihood of greater team successes will follow, and you’ll have a far better chance of creating a truly inspiring workplace culture.

Of course, it’s not necessarily a simple shift to make. Negative energy begets more negative energy. And don’t discount the notion that it’s fun to gripe! We all do it, and there are times when there’s nothing more fun than participating in a good mutual “rant-in” over a steaming cup of coffee.

So what can you do?

Start simply by raising awareness. Remind people of the power of the language they use in the workplace and to be aware of how they are coming across, including their body language, facial expressions, and overall energy level. Remind people that how they say things matters – a lot!

A giant mascot, fun signs, and reminder messages throughout your office can help people think twice before they speak and encourage them to be aware of how they might be perceived.

To help your team become more conscious of its attitudes and language, try distributing some handheld counters, the kind museum attendants use to measure the number of people attending an exhibit. Then have everyone tally up the number of negative comments they either speak themselves or hear over the course of a week. Now, unless you also tally the positives, you won’t have a sense of the ratio, but at least you’ll raise awareness of the language being used on your team.

You also can try some other tricks, at least until you and your team are more aware of the language. Snapping an elastic band on your wrist every time you say something negative, or having people pay a quarter into the social fund each time they use a “seagull comment,” are a little



gimmicky, but they can be fun, help raise awareness and, at least at the start, help you raise loads of money!

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you also need to consider that the seagulls might just have something important to say, they just don't know how to express it in a positive way.

Open and honest communication, including direct feedback and honest criticism, is a hallmark characteristic of any successful organization. After all, not every idea is a great idea! As draining as non-constructive negative energy is on a workplace, there's also the danger of falling into "group think" mode, where teams that are too focused on putting on a warm and fuzzy happy face to avoid conflict at all costs end up ignoring the proverbial elephant in the room, wasting time, and expending energy on truly bad, even dangerous ideas. When not all the voices get heard on a team, for fear of coming across as a seagull or fear of retaliation, then mistakes, sometimes critical ones, can happen and the best ideas don't necessarily win the day.

Great workplaces create an environment where all ideas are open to inquiry and honest debate.

Keep in mind, the reason employees sometimes resort to seagull behavior is because they haven't been given all of the information, they feel excluded, or they feel like they haven't been heard and given a proper voice at the table. To build a great workplace culture, you need to differentiate between honest, open, and constructive debate and criticism vs. draining, energy-sucking, destructive language.

And it's not enough to simply tell people to, "Quit being seagulls!"

One of the keys to great communication success is to train, mentor and coach team members on how to give constructive criticism and express concerns in a more positive manner. You must show people how to move from destructive communication to constructive communication. From being a seagull, to well, becoming a dove. From complaining to explaining.

Think about the simple mindset shift when moving from a "complaining mode" to "explaining mode." Explaining a position, explaining a perspective, explaining a concern suggests a more neutral, positive tone that encourages a dialogue, as opposed to a complaining mindset that conjures up the image of a drive-by rant.

The following page is a summary of the shift in attitudes and behaviors that need to happen to shift from complaining to explaining.



Destructive Criticism “Sea Gull” Complaining

- ✗ Complains to anyone with a pulse
- ✗ Complains in anger
- ✗ Presents a monologue
- ✗ Assumes bad intent
- ✗ Accuses: Finger pointing out
- ✗ Focuses on subjective attitude and labeling (“Bob’s a jerk!”)
- ✗ Only talks about the negative; what’s not working
- ✗ Makes it all about them
- ✗ Takes it personally
- ✗ “Blamestorms”: Looks to assign blame; problem-focused

Constructive Criticism “Dove” Explaining

- ✓ Explains to people with finger on the pulse (only talk to people who can do something about it!)
- ✓ Explains in calm
- ✓ Creates a dialogue with the other parties
- ✓ Assumes good intent behind a decision or idea. Consider how much stress and negative energy would be erased if everyone assumed good intentions, regardless of how frustrated they were about the decision itself
- ✓ Finger pointing in (takes responsibility for own behaviors and perceptions)
- ✓ Explains observable behaviours and how that effects their own perceptions (“When Bob slams the door I feel like...”)
- ✓ Includes the positive; what is working
- ✓ Connects their concerns to the bigger picture and context (“I understand that from a company perspective...”, “I know the customers need this, however...”)
- ✓ Doesn’t take it personally
- ✓ Brainstorms: brings forward alternative solutions; offers to help solve the issue; solution-focused

Moving from a complaining to explaining culture won’t happen overnight. It requires a collective shift in attitudes and modeled leadership from the top, reflected in both words and actions.

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