Negativity is a Cancer

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

I believe that negativity is a kind of cancer that occurs in many organizations. It has a growing and debilitating impact on any group where it is allowed to fester. Stamping out all negativity is a daunting a task, just like trying to stamp out all diseased cells in a human body that has been infected with a cancer. For the survival of the organism, it is important to try as best we can to get rid of the problems. This article suggests some possible treatments for a negativity disease that has taken root in an organization.

It is important to realize that the cause of negativity may or may not be legitimate. Some people are just negative by nature and will grumble even under ideal conditions, while others become negative only after years of what they perceive as abuse. For example, if you are a leader and are faced with a number of people who poison the environment with toxic rhetoric daily, you need to consider whether you and your policies have done enough to create an environment of trust. If you are a leader in a group where there are just one or two individuals that are usually the ones generating negativity, what strategies can you use to turn the situation around?

First, you need to identify the sources of negativity. You must find the tumor. This is a simple task. Usually people know which individuals instigate most of the negative energy in a group. Often they are "informal leaders" to whom other people listen. Once you have identified the ringleaders of negativity, you need to establish a specific strategy to deal with these people, and, hopefully, turn them around. There are many options to do this, just as there are many treatments for physical cancer depending on the type of cancer, the stage of the disease, and the physician doing the treatments. Here are a few possible tools to rid an organization of negativity.

Seek assistance through peers. The peers of the troublemaker have the ability to let the person know that the organization would be in better shape if this person could lighten up. It could be that the peer pressure takes the form of some jovial ribbing about the propensity to be negative. (Note: I will use the female pronoun in the rest of this article, but realize the situation would be the same for both genders.) Peer pressure might take the form of a group agreeing to make only positive comments for two days and see who breaks ranks first. The idea here is to expose the tumor clearly so treatment is easier and can be more focused.

Adopt the person. As a leader, you are free to "adopt" a troublemaker so you can open an ongoing dialog. Try to understand her psychological makeup to find out what drives her to be negative. By listening intently to her message and reinforcing her candor rather than always fighting the message, you can gain a better understanding of her point of view, and she will trust you more. Learn her aspirations and dreams. Find out about her family life. Take a real interest. This process is similar to all the diagnostic tests done on a cancer patient. Also, let her know that you value her ideas simply because she is an informal leader. Bring her into the management circle as a resource. Seek out ways to involve her ideas in decisions that impact the group. In some cases, you can turn the person completely around, and you have a super positive person who is also a natural leader. Wow! That changes the culture quickly. I have seen miracles like this happen.

Level with the person - You might take the approach to be logical with her. Take her aside and reflect that you know at least some of the negative energy that gives rise to low morale and rumors is coming from her. Let her know that she is hurting this organization by doing this. Ask for her help to turn down the negative energy when talking with people. Set an expectation that she can change her mental process to be a better citizen. Perhaps send her to a course like the Dale Carnegie Course. This strategy will not work with every hardened grumbler, but in some cases the gentle medication approach can cause the cancer to get better without more radical treatment. This is especially true when the condition is caught early. In this case your own candor may help bridge a trust gap and be a kind of wakeup call this person was needing.

Isolate her by moving her to another area. This is a dangerous ploy, and it would backfire in all but the most extreme cases. If it is either fire this woman or move her to a different environment, you can try the latter. You would need to couple this approach with a progressive counseling process, so she would be on Final Warning at the time of reassignment. In the case of dual grumblers, sometimes by separating the individuals, you can divide and conquer, since they lose their synergy by not being allowed to inflame each other. Often it is safer to just cut out the tumor and be done with it. That is an option, especially if the negativity is starting to spread to many others.

Do some team building - You might be able to impact the negativity by some simple team building techniques. Make sure the group shares a common goal, and work to build trust within the team. It is hard to maintain negativity in an environment of high trust. Spend time documenting the behaviors that the group intends to follow. This will allow other members to call her on negativity once the group decides this is inappropriate behavior.

There are other ways to chip away at negativity in a work group. Use your imagination, and do not always use the same approach. What works with one individual might backfire in another case, just as treating any individual with cancer needs to have a unique approach. Be flexible, creative, and persistent, and you will be able to turn around many of the cells of negativity. Do not expect to win them all. You cannot.

Finally, if there are several groups who are negative in your sphere of influence, you need to consider that the real problem might be you. Or it could be another weak link somewhere else in the management chain. It could be that corporate communications or policies are inhibiting trust. In my leadership consulting experience, the problem of low trust can often be traced to a leader with low Emotional Intelligence. Investigate this possibility thoroughly without being defensive.

If there is too much negativity in your organization, what are you doing to change your own behaviors? People generally become negative when they feel abused over a long period of time. Look at your own policies and

practices and figure out if you can reduce negativity easily by changing yourself than by trying to change them.

It is up to the leader to take responsibility for building an environment of trust. Leadergrow provides many consulting, coaching, and training services that can help leaders and groups build a culture of trust, so negativity is less of an issue.

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