
The Mathis Group's

Messenger

Vol. 1 No. 2

April, 2003

10 Commandments for Dealing with Workplace Negativity

By Dr. Keith Mathis



Do co-workers upset you because of all the things they gripe about at work? Have you ever thought to yourself, "I am so sick of hearing the gossip and lies about people I work with?" If so, you have probably experienced what is known as negativity in the workplace.

Negativity in the workplace is becoming extremely common in organizations today. Many say it is because of the disillusionment that employees have with their jobs. Others say it is due to the fast-paced changes everyone is dealing with on the job. Regardless of why the negativity is in the organization, I want to show you 10 ways to reduce the negativity and increase employee morale.

1. Thou shalt determine which department, shift or work area is experiencing the most negativity.

Determining where the negativity is originating is common knowledge in most organizations. Employees know that certain departments, shifts or work areas will talk about or spread distorted information. After determining where the negativity is originating, you have the opportunity to use some of the other commandments to stop or reduce it. You will never stop all negative comments from your workforce, but you can reduce and isolate them.

2. Thou shalt turn up the listening mode of all managers.

The art of listening is important with overcoming negativity. Listening allows workers to complain in a manner that will get results or increase their understanding of why something is happening. Many good workers just want to talk about something and express their concerns. They are concerned which means they care about doing a good job. Creating a forum that allows good employees an opportunity to give feedback, even if it is negative, will reduce the gossip overall.

3. Thou shalt equip and train people prior to a change.

Equipping employees with the skills they need prior to making the change is sometimes difficult to do. In many cases, we do not know what training might be needed until the change has been facilitated. However, if we brainstorm this consistently with managers and those employees who actually do the work, one might be surprised what training needs will surface.

4. Thou shalt allow employees to regularly have access to all levels of management.

Visibility of management helps workers feel they have access to decision makers. Many employees will not talk to upper management, but they feel they could if they wanted to, and this gives them the perception of access. One thing that is not working is telling workers your door is always open for them if they want to talk. This places all the facilitation on the worker. The concern I have over this is that many workers are good people and excellent employees, but they do not have the same people skills that upper management possesses. To come into upper management's turf is very intimidating and fearful for them.

5. Thou shalt involve workers in brainstorming the implementation of all changes.

When workers inherit plans but are not asked to give input, they become negative and cynical. This is due to the fact that many plans made in the boardroom are not realistic for frontline implementation. Workers who give input during the implementation stage are experts on what will work in their area. They can give ideas that will speed up the plan and highlight concern areas. To make workers implement without input will cause the workers to anticipate the project will fail.

6. Thou shalt determine if the company bears part of the responsibility for the rumors and negativity.

Is the organization doing things that increase negativity or rumors? If an organization violates employees through disrespect or numerous acts of blaming, then they bear some of the responsibility. Workers will not take risks if they are fearful of being reprimanded. In order to compete today, we want our employees to evaluate new ways of doing business and new ways of solving a problem. If management is disrespectful to employees with derogatory comments or

(continued on page 2 10 Commandments)

*Don't forget that appreciation is
always appreciated.
E.C. McKenzie*

The Mathis Group's Messenger



(continued from page 1 10 Commandments)

correction in front of their peers, then the organization bears part of the responsibility for the negativity.

7. *Thou shalt praise good work skills.*

Praise, don't we all love it when people acknowledge what we are doing that pleases them? Recently, I was eating in a restaurant, and I noticed the waitress who was going to service our section was extremely efficient in her duties. I verbally told her how impressed I was with the service she was delivering. Her smile and kindness followed the praise almost immediately. Did I receive bad service after those comments? Of course not. She made sure she took a personal interest in meeting every demand for refills, extra napkins and, of course, desserts. The normal employee who is supervised by their manager is no different. They want to know they are doing a good job, and it is being noticed.

8. *Thou shalt create a code of behavior.*

What is a code of behavior? A code of behavior is a list of values or behaviors that a team, department, or entire company states as to how they will treat each other. I normally lead a group to come up with 10 or less sentences on the code of conduct. This allows them to have a code that can be remembered and followed. When I am brought into an organization to do consulting concerning the negativity or conflict, creating a code is one of the first things we do. Examples of this code could be the following:

We will disagree agreeably
We will not interrupt when another is talking
We will seek to build up and not put down
We will be honest and respectful

9. *Thou shalt increase communication with information about the organization's goals and direction.*

Increasing communication can help reduce negative comments of uninformed workers. In the past, organizations felt no need to communicate with their workers. This was due to the philosophy that employees were hired not to think but to do what supervisors said. Today, employees make the organization successful by solving problems and being creative thinkers. In order to facilitate this type of activity, one must communicate constantly new information and changes. This type of communication will speed up changes and clarify information being communicated.

10. *Thou shalt confront those who are verbally harming others.*

Confronting others is not fun; however, it must be part of dealing with workplace negativity. Confrontation of others should be used as a last resort after many of the other commandments have been attempted. If one continues to contaminate others with negativity, confrontation is necessary.

Without confrontation, the situation normally does not get better, but escalates. Several rules of engagement will assist you in confronting the negaholic:

- Do your homework before you confront. Know how often they talk about negative events and whom they are talking to.
- Discuss the concerns in private. If we embarrass them in front of others, they can use this as a martyr complex and gain sympathy.
- Plan what you are going to say. Confrontation is so upsetting to many that it is possible to become sidetracked due to emotion. I will make notes of an introduction and a conclusion.
- Discuss performance or behaviors. Discussing performance or behaviors gives you more power to confront the negative person. When we talk about attitude, this immediately puts us into a gray area for confronting.
- Remain calm regardless of what they do. Many workers will get upset and emotional due to being caught. They might make accusatory comments to you or put down others who spread negativity more than they do.
- Stay focused on this one employee. When the worker feels the confrontation, they will name or blame others. Do not chase this rabbit. You are there to discuss the behavior and performance of this employee, not others.



Check out our exciting
courses!!

- ☑ *A Positive Approach To Conflict Resolution*
- ☑ *Improving Communication Skills*

Contact The Mathis Group today
for additional information or to discuss your customized
onsite seminar.

The Mathis Group, Inc.

Dr. Keith Mathis
106 Lakeview Woods
Eureka, MO 63025
1-800-224-3731
636/938-5292 voice/fax
kmathis@ix.netcom.com
www.keithmathis.com