

How badly does it sting?

Unpacking negativity in the workplace & when it can actually be good for you and your team

By Tiffany Missiha

Negativity has a bad rep. Even worse, negativity in the workplace is seen as an infectious germ that can quickly and easily permeate the walls, air, fingertips, minds and hearts of everyone and everything in the workplace. Understandably so, as criticism, hostility, confrontation, disempowerment, and frustration are hardly ever pleasant experiences. It is time to give negativity a good look in the eye and have a little compassion. Surely there's got to be some use to this seemingly toxic experience?



In an evolutionary sense, things that are seemingly negative, help us survive. They often indicate some sort of threat in the environment, and initiate the flight or fight response. Negativity is useful information and it moves, sometimes even propels us, into action. In fact, negativity can be a powerful enabler of performance, *if it is used consciously and well-intended.*

Our work with teams often lends itself for the following topics to naturally unfold and make their way into the room. I like to think of them as a family as they share similar genes, sometimes look alike, and often live together and share the same space. For now, I introduce you to two family members. Meet:

Challenge- the grandparent of the family. The head of the pyramid; one who is wise if his wisdom and insight is shared in a timely and well-planned fashion. Challenge can be best understood as any sort of disruption to an existing state, relationship, thought, or moment. The good news is that challenge is neither inherently good nor bad- what makes it so depends on what else comes in the bag. In our work we've found that when challenge is misplaced, untimed, careless, and overly personal, it can be destructive to workplace relationships. In contrast, when challenge is accompanied with the right kind or degree of support, challenge becomes constructive and conducive to healthy conflict- one of the key characteristics of strong, stable, resilient relationships and the highest performing teams. Trust, support, openness, and care allow for challenge to exist without posing a threat to the nature and stability of the relationship(s) itself.



Feedback- the cousin of challenge. Often misunderstood, sometimes undervalued. Feedback is often labelled as positive or negative because of two factors: the way in which it is delivered, and the way in which it is perceived or understood. But just like challenge, feedback need not be categorized in this way, as 'negative feedback' says more about the person giving it than the receiver him/herself. Feedback instead can be either formative or developmental. *Formative* feedback tends to reinforce and embed the experience or behavior that preceded it. *Developmental* feedback, which often entails some sort of recommendation for change, can also be a powerful driver for improvement and growth so long as it is good-intentioned. Otherwise it is seen as criticism and can elicit a whole host of reactions. Well-intentioned feedback that comes from a good place and that is 'heard' and understood in this way is the most likely scenario to elicit the best possible outcome.



When it goes wrong, it can go very wrong...



The 5:1 ratio

What do you tend to remember most, the 10 really positive comments or interactions with colleagues or superiors, or the 1 that stung really badly? As humans we tend to orient to the negative and it's hard to negate the impact that it has on our self-esteem, self-worth, and capability beliefs. John Gottman, a world-renown Relationship Psychologist, found that it takes 5 positive interactions to counteract every negative one. Caveat- they have to be genuine! It's not to say go off and shower your colleagues with empty and hollow compliments and pick-me-ups, but it is to say that, be conscious of the digs, put-downs, criticism, banter, and sly remarks as these can be damaging and toxic to workplace relationships- whether it's visible to the eye or not.

On the flip side: When Negativity can be Transformational

Shattered Assumptions

Sometimes, if it stings bad enough, negative experiences and interactions can shatter our deeply held assumptions of ourselves and our worlds. When this happens, one of the growth outcomes that can (not always) result is that we process and integrate the new information into our worldly maps of ourselves and our relationships to rebuild our self-schemas and life narratives. In other words, negatively-toned experiences can serve as a catalyst for personal growth, if they impact us deeply enough and if we have enough support and personal resources to bounce back.

Negativity at work can be either a deadly and destructive toxin or a catalyst for transformational change, progress, and growth. It can feed off of itself if left to its own device and left to run wild and free. When we make conscious choices and deliberate interactions to use what may *seem* like negative experiences in a well-intended and constructive way, we can be in better control of the impact and desired outcome of this weapon. It can either completely kill teams and workplace relationships, or it can protect against complacency, collusion and stagnation to facilitate momentum, progression and growth. Use it wisely and with caution.

4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse...

... Because they all tend to storm in at the same time! Blame, stonewalling, contempt, and defensiveness are 4 common behaviours that people engage in when they feel attacked. It is our natural tendency and instinct to protect our egos (no matter how big or small). This can take the form of meeting hostility with hostility, meeting a raised voice with a notch even higher. The tension that is created when this happens can be cut with a knife. If you spot these behaviours in your work environment, it is likely that there is a wound underneath. Be brave to approach and address the core issue before this tension grows and fills the walls of your office.



A platform for collaboration and innovation

Without friction or resistance, we become stagnate. A wheel can only move forward when it rubs against a hard surface. We can only walk forward when we actively push our feet against and away from the ground. Without this other material or surface, we would stay in one place. Comfortable, but not very productive! Healthy conflict- which can look like differences in perspectives, friendly critics, devil's advocate, and openness of opinions- is a necessary to make progress when it comes to collaboration, innovation, change, and effective decision making.