

Understanding and Managing Negativity in the Workplace

by Linda Riepe

Every center seems to have at least one person who has a tendency toward negativism. You know the type, the person who creates and fuels the grapevine, complains about other staff not doing their share, and manages to pull others into the workplace black hole of despair.

In addition to up-front whining and complaining, this person is often the source of unsettling rumors. A few words out of context, a faulty perception of an encounter, or a perceived personal slight catapults them into action. Sadly, the fallout from these individuals raises the stress level of other staff, reduces productivity, and places roadblocks in the path of problem-solving efforts.

Why are child care centers fertile ground for this type of person? Lack of benefits, low wages, intense emotional and physical demands, and a perceived lack of appreciation from the public are contributing factors. Public opinion that child care is *just baby-sitting* strongly impacts the self-worth of many workers in this field. Among all types of jobs and careers, child care providers, who are doing the most important job next to parenting, receive the least amount of compensation and respect. Is it any wonder that staff burnout and turnover are high and that negative attitudes creep into the daily lives of workers?

While the problems may be indignant to the job, the negativity and pessimism of staff members create a

continual drain on the energy and resources of most programs. In seminars and workshops, participants share horror stories from their centers and anxiously seek solutions. Perhaps the first step toward managing negativity is the development of

As child care workers, we understand the importance of approval and acceptance by others in the development and maintenance of positive self-esteem. Personal perceptions, accurate or inaccurate, come from the mirror image we see in the faces of others. In spite of ongoing efforts to educate the public, that reflection from society continues to be predominately negative. This public devaluation of our jobs puts workers in a defensive position that erodes self-worth.

Within individual programs, expectations from parents are high. Media coverage of claims about child abuse and molestation create an attitude of mistrust and suspicion. More and more of the children we care for are

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a better understanding of the underlying causes and typical characteristics of negative people. Clearly each center and individual has problems that are unique, but the basic reasons for this behavior are similar nationwide.

struggling with fears and problems related to poverty, crime, and uncertainty. Minimal levels of funding are barely maintained. We know from research and personal experience that *ideal* environments for children's programs often cannot

be attained. Operational costs for such dream programs seldom match income levels. With all of these stresses, even the strongest personality may find optimistic attitudes hard to maintain.

At the end of the work day, many child care workers find little escape when they go home. Low wages force them to face the problems of supporting and managing a family with fewer resources than someone who collects trash for a living. Limited funds are available for fun and relaxation activities that might offer some relief. These problems may be magnified in the case of single staff whose lack of resources and energy also leave them isolated from typical support networks.

It is particularly sad that child care workers — the most caring, nurturing people in society — have little or no ability to nurture themselves. The unfortunate result can be a belief that problems or disasters are inevitable, unavoidable, and insurmountable. A sense of learned *helplessness* develops that strongly impacts their view of work and life in general.

When we understand that negativism is related to a sense of feeling helpless to find a solution or make a change for the better, it can change the way we approach and interact with negative people. These people tend to have lots of experience with failure, the logical result of which is a belief that nothing they do will affect outcomes.

To reverse that thinking pattern requires skillful intervention. The following ten strategies involve a combination of ways to change your own behavior along with the introduction of techniques that *disarm* negative responses.

1

If you are working with a negative person, resist the temptation to argue or try to persuade them to accept your position or point of view.

Negative people are absolutely convinced that ideas and approaches won't work. They have a strong distrust of *managers* as a group. Often they see an underlying motive of self-service in the actions of others.

2

Do not rush into proposing solutions to problems.

One of the most common reactions to suggestions is playing of the “*yes, but . . . game*,” rejecting any solution offered. By playing that game, the person has a great deal of *negative* power over the manager. They keep you involved with guessing what they will accept as you try to find the right answer. For a negative thinker, no right answer exists.

3

Be willing to accept them as they are.

Negativity is a personality and style issue based on a lifetime of experience. By consistently applying effective communication strategies, you may begin to see some *style* changes over a period of time. However, keeping realistic expectations about the overall impact you can make on any individual will help you deal with your own frustration.

Negative behavior is rarely limited to the work environment. Clearly, most of us have little or no impact on what happens in an employee's home, so it is important to keep the focus on how to manage the negative behavior at work. Understand that it

is likely that these strategies will continue to be needed throughout your working relationship. With negativity, we are better off trying to manage one situation at a time while we hope for a long-term change in attitude.

4

Ask them to state “specific” objections to the ideas and suggestions of others.

When they say something won't work, ask them to tell you the two most important objections they have about the proposed approach or solution. When they are put on the spot to be specific, it is harder to be negative. It can break the pattern of the *instant negative response*. Additionally, it gives them some *positive* power or control over the solution. It is also a productive way to examine valid concerns or objections to ideas.

5

Analyze the situation honestly in terms of worst case scenarios.

Often negative people are fearful of taking action without really knowing what they are afraid of. They grant an incredible amount of power to minor problems. When they learn to really look at the worst possible result or consequence, most problems and situations become manageable and less frightening.

6

Use every possible opportunity to “empower” them.

Remember that negative behavior is directly related to a sense of helplessness and a perceived lack of power. Most people have previously

made helpful contributions or developed good ideas. When approaching a new problem or task, draw on those past successes. Remember when you worked on the committee to . . . ? How did you turn that project into such a success?

It is helpful to be reminded of times when things worked out or when previous ideas led to the success of a project. Negative people often have experienced so few *successes* that they lose sight of success as a possibility. These individuals need reminders of good results.

7

Help them think in shades of gray.

Negative people tend to see things as black or white. They have trouble accepting a temporary solution or anything less than *perfection* when it comes to problem solving. They have high standards for themselves and others. If the *perfect* or *ideal* solution cannot be found, it is easy to get stuck within the boundaries of the problem. Helping them identify partial or temporary solutions may be a useful way to move them from black to gray.

Another strategy is to put suggested solutions into place on a trial basis. Fear of making a mistake is reduced when solutions are not viewed as long term. The idea is to make decisions seem less monumental and threatening.

8

Seek support from your most negative people prior to bringing the problem to a group discussion or meeting.

Generally this is most effective if it is done during a private discussion.

Nay-sayers have a reputation to maintain with peers. By giving them the chance to express objections and feelings one to one, the need to do so in the group is reduced. Again, this is a way to empower the negative person and identify the *real* issues before attempting to solve a larger problem.

When you ask for a private moment with the person, it is a way to let them know you value their ideas and feelings. Draw out the specific objections/fears during that discussion and analyze each one together to defuse its importance.

This not only gives you more information about the person's concerns, it also allows you to garner needed support in advance. With fears set aside, they can help gain the support and acceptance of others they influence. Often the negative person has great ideas and is more likely to offer them up in private.

9

Suggest that opinions and ideas on a problem or topic of discussion be submitted in written form prior to a meeting.

Ask for the rationale behind ideas/concerns and objections. Written words are perceived as more powerful to many people. When the negative person sits down to write about their feelings (accompanied by rationale), they have an opportunity to see that fears may be unfounded. It also allows them to assess real feelings without being *put on the spot* in a meeting. Many people feel more positive when they have the chance to be heard.

10

Find ways to have fun!

Regardless of individual lifestyles and support systems, providing less serious moments and social time with colleagues lightens any job. Fun times can create enthusiasm, optimism, and positive attitudes. These characteristics are all part of the makeup of *successful* people.

Take every opportunity to recognize staff efforts and reward the behavior and attitudes you value. Success is the greatest motivator of all. Find ways to utilize individual strengths rather than fight those characteristics. Even the smallest rewards and recognition are appreciated. Remember that rewards need not always come from management; peer rewards and recognition create harmony and good will. You do not need a big budget to offer rewards, incentives, and recognition. Something as simple as a notation in the newsletter or on the bulletin board about the efforts of individuals can go a long way toward improving staff attitudes. If you don't know how to begin, try asking staff what motivates them or what would make them feel good about themselves and the program.

The mirror image we see each day is reflected back in our work attitudes. If that image is negative, it will take some time to change it, but it can be done. Establish confidence with staff that you will listen, be empathetic, and supportive, and optimism will likely follow. Keep sight of the messages, benefits, and rewards we can and cannot control.

We are all working to gain better wages and acceptance from society, but the immediate solution may be within the walls of our own programs. The bottom line may be that child care workers need more nurturing than the average employee.

Linda Riepe has over 25 years experience in the field of early education. She presents workshops and writes articles on various child care topics in addition to her full-time position as coordinator of early childhood programs at Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon.