

Beware the office downer: How to contain the bad vibes

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Research suggests that negative attitudes at work stand to contaminate a company's culture. But there are a few antidotes to this problem.



Goodness knows, plenty workers have reason to complain these days. And yet, most every office has a couple people who take that right a little too liberally -- they are, as a rule obtrusively upset.

They are what management expert Rob Cross calls "de-energizers:" "The people who just suck the life out of the room with the way they interact or tones they take."

Life-sucking is, without doubt, counter-productive to a healthy workplace, and many a worker would probably prefer to avoid the negative effects of de-energizers. To do so, they might first have to buy into a system that leadership experts call the "informal network." This network exists outside of the official corporate food chain. Instead, it is built on connections between people who, regardless of rank, are either key motivators, energy drainers, or somewhere in between. Cross claims it's possible to actually map the energy flow through the informal network at an organization.

If all this seems a little floofy to you, you're not alone. Both Cross and Booz & Company senior partner Jon Katzenbach have worked with high-level managers who resist the concept that there is a workplace structure outside of the one they know and control. "If you ask people in the upper levels of an organization to identify the best motivators, they won't pick them right," Katzenbach says.

And yet, with a little digging, you can unearth these networks. "We can create diagrams and other visuals that show the connections amongst the people," says Cross, who is a professor at University of Virginia's McIntire School of Commerce. Those diagrams map who interacts with whom and how often. "Then we overlay the engagement scores and career satisfaction scores," Cross continues, and you can pinpoint your motivating and de-energizing employees.

Why do this? There's evidence that de-energizers truly hurt a company. In a 1994 paper published in *The Journal of Vocational Behavior*, researchers Lawrence Necowitz and Mary Roznowski found that people who have a baseline negative outlook about work tend to withdraw more from productive work behavior than their colleagues, regardless of how satisfied they feel about their jobs. "It may be that these individuals focus on the negative aspects of their jobs even under otherwise pleasant conditions," the paper suggests.

They also tend to drag their colleagues down with them. In unpublished research that's currently under peer review, Cross has found that "negative interactions that create stress

have a significant effect on a range of measures of physical health in the workplace." In other words, dealing with too much negativity can make people sick.

Those negative interactions are also significantly more potent than positive ones. While there are far more energizers than de-energizers in organizations, "the de-energizers have more than twice the negative impact on measures of performance and employee well-being as the energizers have positively," Cross says. Indeed, roughly 5% of employees account for 90% of people's work-related misery, Cross argues.

So how do you stay out of their circle of negative energy? You shouldn't try to fix their attitude, both Katzenbach and Cross agree. People who fundamentally resent their jobs will resist any effort to pull them up -- their end goal isn't necessarily to feel better. But the opposite is also true. There are people at companies, Katzenbach says, who gain satisfaction from making others feel good about their work, even though management may never recognize their role.

Managers can make a difference by guiding the workplace environment. Most employees are neither top motivators nor powerful downers; they are somewhere between the two extremes yet highly influenced by both. The best way to get everyone's spirits up is to position them closer to your active energizers -- create opportunities for employees to learn from your best people. Positivity, Katzenbach says, "is a catching disease."

These positive players behave in certain ways, according to Cross: "They tend to see possibilities in situations rather than constraints. They find ways to make sure that others feel part of a solution." They can also teach these traits to people who would be willing to embrace them and generally tend to know the people they could most easily influence, Katzenbach says.

Of course, it takes a pretty in-tune manager to hire experts to pick through the informal network at a big company and then feed the best parts of it. Usually, Cross says, he works with the top layers of management at big companies. For those of us at the bottom of the corporate chain, we may be left to fend for ourselves.

But the lessons still apply. Simply put, offices everywhere might become much happier places if workers try to surround themselves with those who make them feel good about their jobs and themselves.

Fonte: Fortune. Disponível em:

<http://management.fortune.cnn.com/2012/10/10/beware-the-office-downer-how-to-contain-the-bad-vibes/?iid=SF_F_River>. Acesso em: 10 Oct. 2012.