

## Tips & Tactics

### Encourage Team Members To Be Positive in Tough Times

Negative behavior on the part of some team members may blossom during the tough times, says Kevin Sensenig, Ph.D., RODP, and global brand champion for Dale Carnegie & Associates ([www.dalecarnegie.com](http://www.dalecarnegie.com)), Hauppauge, New York.

"When people are uncertain or nervous, not knowing what may happen next [with the current national economic situation]," he says, "they may not feel comfortable asking directly about how the issues may affect the organization.

"Instead they ask a co-worker, which leads to rumor generation. Rumors can add more frustration and fear and that can lead to some team workers being difficult to work with because they don't know who to trust."

Another problem that may emerge during the tough times such as the U.S. is currently experiencing is an increase in team members complaining about other team members. "All these little irritants that might have existed in the past become major issues to some team members," notes Sensenig.

"They have trouble getting past the little things that people do to annoy them. It happens when things are uncertain. People go into protection mode—they're trying to protect their job so they point out someone else's problems or challenges, thinking that it will take the focus off them and onto the other person. This can lead to negativity in teams."

Team members under stress can twist even casual communication. Interpretation of nonchalant comments about someone's performance or about a customer may become blown out of proportion by a team member who hears another team member or the leader say it, according to Sensenig.

To explain a bit further, someone might say, "I hope that John [the team member] didn't irritate Mr. Johnson [a customer] today when he told him the product wasn't in stock."

During the bad times, a team member might hear that and tell others, "I hope we don't lose our biggest customer," notes Sensenig. "The team member may become fearful." The anxiety may spread to other team members and eventually the entire team may become unsuccessful because the team is no longer functioning as a cohesive unit, he explains.

"One person with negativity and poor performance who remains in that mode may influence the rest of the team, pulling away and isolating that person," says Sensenig.

Ignoring these problems will not help and will not make them go away, stresses Sensenig. Instead, HR can help the team leader face the challenge of dealing with a usually productive team member who exhibits negative behavior. "HR becomes the coach and thought leader, the resource to support the team manager in solving the problem," he explains.

#### Deal with Negatives In Positive Manner

Sensenig notes that it's important for HR professionals, in their role as coaches to team leaders, to remember that people want to be part of the company and part of the team.

When negative behaviors appear, it's often in reaction to fear, stress and uncertainty. This must also be communicated to the team leaders.

Three principles HR professionals may share with team leaders for use in dealing with the negative behavior on the part of one or more team members come from Dale Carnegie, according to Sensenig:

1. We should call attention to people's mistakes indirectly. When we point it out [negative behavior] in a positive way, they'll be more likely to address it and get back on track on their own. Sometimes when we put something in someone's face, he or she will react to that even more negatively and exhibit even more negative behaviors.
2. We need to ask questions rather than give direct orders. Why is this happening? Why are you feeling this way? What's causing you to react or behave this way? The person may save face and be able to change the behavior, saving himself and moving forward.
3. We need to praise all improvement [in behavior]. We need to give positive reinforcement. An example of that is, "Hey, I noticed a much better attitude in that last team meeting. Good job!" Another example is, "I noticed that with the last project, you followed up with every detail. Way to go!"

#### Prevention Is Best Cure

It is worthwhile to discuss how human resources executives and company leaders might work to prevent negative behavior altogether. Sensenig says that much of the anxiety and frustration that leads to negative behavior may be avoided by encouraging open dialogue between leaders and employees.

"Employees shouldn't just hear information from the top and try to assume how they fit into it. Leaders must be more approachable and communicate new strategies and how employees fit into them," he concludes.

#### Have a tip, a question, or just want to vent?

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