

A WORKPLACE MAKEOVER...

GIVE NEGATIVE ATTITUDES THE "NIP & TUCK"

BY MICHELLE RAY

Negative attitudes continue to be one of the most destructive forces operating in our personal and professional lives. Today's workplace is riddled with them. We transfer our negative experiences at work to our private lives, particularly to those closest to us. Negativity is by far the biggest complaint of managers and workers at all levels. Everyone is struggling to find a solution, as well as methods to minimize the impact of this mindset and get along with others more effectively. When it comes to *all* relationships, our greatest stressors are psychological...often self-imposed and self-manufactured. Our internal communication or "dialogue" often creates stress, manifesting as behaviours that we continue to practice over a long period of time.



KEY STRATEGIES TO CHANGE YOUR "INTERNAL DIALOGUE"

1 DIFFICULT OR DIFFERENT?

The capacity to internalize or externalize our thoughts and emotions is a choice that we make for ourselves. We have learned a pattern of thinking and acting that can be unlearned. The way that we perceive ourselves and the world has a direct effect on our relationships with others. For example, is a person really "difficult" to deal with, or are they simply "different"? How can you tell if it is truth or perception? As a professional speaker, I have discovered that presenting this idea is very confronting for certain people in my audience. The different reactions demonstrate to me that people will interpret what I am saying based on their own life experiences first and foremost.

Our frame of reference; our filter for our entire communication process, is a culmination of everything that has happened to us up to this moment. It is through that personal lens that we choose to: accept or reject; like or dislike; love or not love; change or not change. Sometimes we are conscious of this link; i.e., the degree to which we have been influenced and the extent to which we allow our past to dictate our present. Sometimes we are at pains to understand ourselves and our reactions to people, places and situations.

2 MANAGE BEHAVIOUR

Our actions are preceded by our thoughts. Therefore, when we choose our behaviour, our prevailing thoughts about a particular person or situation will direct our actions in the encounter. How do we manage our behaviour? We make a *decision* to respond in a certain way. We are one hundred percent responsible for our behaviour and have no control over the behaviour of others. As frustrating as this may sound, we cannot change anyone! The more we realize that we have tremendous influence by teaching others what we need, the more empowered we feel! The key, of course, is to know *how* to act...not react!

3 BE PATIENT WITH YOURSELF AND OTHERS

Patience is learned, as are all behavioural skills. Often, we have spent years reacting to certain people expecting them to be miraculously different. Inevitably, we become disenchanted and frustrated that they remain the same. Just as they have learned to interact with us, we have learned to interact with them. Once we practice a different response, we need to manage our expectations regarding an immediate change in the other person. Remember, we all have the ability to *affect* another person by the way we choose to act. By doing so, we expend a lot less energy...much better than wishing or hoping others would be different.

4 CHANGE YOUR RESPONSE

I once worked with a dominant personality type—a manager who was excellent with task management, but ineffectual with people skills. Her communication style was autocratic and directive. There was little opportunity for dialogue, and I would allow myself to become intimidated on many occasions. Consequently, I was unhappy at work, lacking the skills to stand up for myself. It is important to mention that you are reading about my experience and perception of this person. I perceived her as a difficult personality and coped by venting to whoever was in earshot, instead of confronting her. Someone else may have had a totally different view had they witnessed our working relationship. My colleague had a more amiable relationship with my manager; I realized that she was able to keep things light and never argued. In other words, she simply let her be.

My level of discomfort propelled me to action! Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "no one can make me feel

inferior without my consent.” It became evident to me that if I wanted to feel better about myself at work, I needed to change my thinking and, consequently, my behaviour. I began to understand that my manager triggered a negative response in me, not because she was my manager, but because I allowed myself to feel lousy. The major discovery, however, was the fact that my behaviour around my manager had very little to do with that moment in time. My reaction toward her intimidation, using the “silent treatment”, had far more to do with me learning my response at an early age when I was around someone who used the same behaviour to get their way. My manager was the catalyst to two profound insights:

- 1) My past finally caught up with my present; and
- 2) My fear of a dominating personality was of my own choosing.

5 BE OBJECTIVE

Finally, as we manage ourselves, we choose to look at the situation objectively rather than personally. By separating issues from personalities, we can communicate our concerns regarding other people’s behaviour with facts rather than emotions.

When we experience discomfort around certain people, one of the challenges we face is to maintain emotional control and express our feelings appropriately. One of the best strategies is to take a moment and observe the other person’s behaviour, and then identify the primary emotion we feel, i.e., anger, frustration, fear, anxiety, etc. As the singer/actor Kenny Rogers says, “you’ve got to know when to hold them, know when to fold them, know when to walk away and know when to run.” When we are able to recognize the trigger, we are in a better position to choose a response that comes from a position of respecting ourselves as well as others.

To facilitate a reduction in negative stress around others, consider the way in which you explain events and situations. Ask yourself if you are being objective. Are you focusing on facts or feelings? Can you distinguish emotions from evidence? If you were experiencing difficulty in a relationship and were uncomfortable with the other person’s behaviour, would you feel confident confronting them?

When you do confront, do you ruminate about the encounter afterwards or are you able to accept that you did your best, no matter what the outcome? Can you let go? These are key questions. There is a particular sequence to them...your answers tell you a lot about your level of self-acceptance, willingness, conflict management skills, relationship skills, and your ability to bounce back after a confrontation or circumstance. It all starts with *how we communicate with ourselves*.

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