

## **Nip negativity in the bud**

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By Bob McKenzie

Spiro Agnew is credited with coining the term “nattering nabobs of negativism.”

He used the term while referring to the media who badgered him continuously throughout his short stint as vice president.

For those of you born after the baby boomer generation, Spiro Agnew was the vice president under Richard Nixon from 1968 through October 1974, when he resigned after pleading “no contest” to charges of tax fraud.

Many who hear “nattering nabobs of negativism” for the first time think of the plethora of people who persist in protesting every decision or action in the workplace. As you read this, you will undoubtedly think of the people in your organization who fit into this category. Every workplace has at least one nabob of negativism.

Most common source of negativism

The grapevine is a phenomenon that is common in most, if not all, organizations. It is also the breeding ground for negativity. Getting engrossed in the grapevine, rumor mill, or other harmful actions breeds contempt for managers, co-workers and the organization as a whole.

Allowed to grow uncontrollably, the gossip mill has been known to ruin careers or bring down entire companies. Negativity is destructive, damaging, and downright devastating to an establishment. Negativity is probably the most detrimental obstruction to progress, productivity, and profitability than any other business practice.

It is easy to fall into the negativity trap. Complaining about others seems to be human nature. Once in the trap it is almost impossible to get out of it since it acts like a whirlpool. It pulls people in and keeps them there. As more and more people are sucked in, the pessimistic undercurrent becomes the norm, and feeding the destructive frenzy becomes the way to be accepted in the organization. The negativity becomes contagious and grows to out of control proportions.

At its worst, negativity invites legal problems; complaints of harassment and discriminations are more common in negative work environments.

How does this happen?

So how do these nattering nabobs get a stronghold on the organization? The answer is simple: *They are allowed to.*

In many cases, the nabobs are encouraged to continue their griping. This encouragement does not come from management, but from co-workers. It seems standard practice to question decisions, second guess management, and blame others when things go awry.

Once this type of behavior has taken hold in the organization, there is little that can be done to stop it. When negativity becomes established, seemingly small and insignificant events get blown out of proportion and become major stumbling blocks to overcome. Employees develop an insatiable appetite for the latest and greatest dirt, ranging from “Who is getting fired?” to “Who’s sleeping with whom?” Others spend about half of their time criticizing other employees instead of doing something positive, and then complain they do not have enough time to finish their work.

What you can do

Think about the new employee who starts a new job in your company and is confronted with co-workers’ stories about all the bad stuff going on. If there are people leaving your company after a short time on the job, you may want to listen in on what the experienced workers are telling new employees. Then think about how much this is costing you and your company in lost productivity.

Here are some things you can do nip negativity in the bud:

**Remind your employees of the dangers of the grapevine.** • The first thing to do is show your employees this article. Ensure them that your door is open they can speak to you openly regarding rumors in a confidential manner.

Also, remind them there is a major advantage in avoiding the nabobs. Given a choice, bosses (you) are much more prone to promote a capable employee who is positive, rather than one who has a negative attitude.

**Give good advice.** • Urge your employees to do two things when they hear others spreading rumors or negative comments: Counterattack or avoid.

To counterattack, all they have to do is to point out positive alternatives to depressing comments or transform negative comments into positive problem-solving events. They can also compliment a colleague when he or she helps out a fellow employee or does someone a favor. Most people work better when someone notices the good things and offers positive comments.

Avoidance is easy. When conversation turn into grumbling, the best thing is to leave the scene.

**Address the source.** • If a specific employee is the source of the trouble, speak to that employee in a private setting. State that the negative behavior is not acceptable and that the employee is putting the morale of the entire workforce at risk and the behavior must stop immediately.

**Keep in the loop.** • You can also make a pre-emptive strike to nip the negativity in the bud by meeting with employees to find out what the grapevine is saying and to set the record straight.

**Talk openly and honestly.** • It is vitally important to be as honest as possible with the employees without revealing confidential company information. Employees will know when managers are trying to hold something back or if they are told a lie. When this happens it is regarded as a betrayal of trust. If there is little or no trust in management, the grapevine and rumors will continue to grow in epidemic proportion. Once trust is gone, it is very difficult for management to regain it.

In a positive work environment, employees enjoy their work, experience less job-related stress, and live healthier lives. Positive work environments are also more creative, progressive, productive and profitable. A positive workplace results in a healthier and happier way to live.

Make a pact to yourself today to avoid negative influences, get pleasure from your job and your work associates.

Negate those nattering nabobs of negativism now and never notice them again.

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