



Managing negativity

So you were attracted to the article headline, weren't you? Actually, it's probably no accident that you saw the title and read on ... because, in fact, we are actually "wired" toward negativity. And of course, township officials, employees and residents are no different. Now please don't use this fact to enable yourself to wallow in self-doubt, anxiety, or "doom and gloom." Instead, read the following information with an approach that focuses on overcoming this hard wiring!

In 2010, authors Dan and Chip Heath wrote in their book "Switch" about "finding the bright spots" in our work and lives in response to research done on negativity. In fact, they isolated some of these "not so fun" facts:

- *Scientists analyzed 558 words in the English language that denote emotions, and found that 62 percent were negative, versus the 38 percent that were positive.*
- *Across the board, no matter what the situation or domain, people who were shown photos of good and bad events spent more time viewing the bad.*
- *When people hear something bad about someone else, they pay more attention to it, reflect on it more, remember it longer and weigh it more when assessing that person. This tendency is called "positive-negative asymmetry."*
- *A researcher reviewed 17 studies of how people interpret and explain events in their lives, such as how fans interpret sports events or how students describe their days in a journal. Across multiple domains—work, politics, sports, relationships—people were more likely to spontaneously bring up negative versus positive events.*

The Heaths' conclusion? "Bad is stronger than good."

SO WHAT'S THE ANSWER?

There's wisdom in that old adage, "See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil." If we know that we spend more time looking at bad than good, why not choose to "see no evil"? Instead, *choose* to look for the good and consciously turn away from the bad. Don't give the "bad" your precious time and attention. While township officials need to stay up to date on public opinion, read those "Letters to the Editor" once only and then move on. Once problems are identified, move toward the positive—looking for solutions.

And "hear no evil"? Don't catch the negativity contagion by participating in, and listening to, negative discussions. Take the emotions out of decision-making and stick to the facts. Ask for supporting data when people voice negative opinions. When people approach you criticizing others, don't listen. Instead, politely ask them what they've done in "going to the source" of the problem. You'll find that by not enabling the negative with listening, you're no longer invited to the pity parties. What a welcome relief!

Choose to "speak no evil." Don't engage in whining, gossiping or bad mouthing. Try using "contrary evidence"—when hearing a person speak about the negatives, ask them what "positives" they see in the situation. And while you may analyze problems at meetings and in committees, carefully report your progress using positive terms when speaking to the public or the media. Move away from talking about problems—and toward identifying opportunities.

Negativity is contagious. While we use the term "disease" figuratively when it comes to negativity, a 2007 study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* revealed that negative opinions cause the greatest attitude shifts, not just from good to bad, but also from bad to worse. In this study, consumers were presented with information about new products and asked to independently form evaluations. Afterward, researchers revealed to participants whether their peers evaluated the same products negatively or positively. Not only did the opinions of others exert especially strong influence on individual attitudes when the opinions were negative, but it was found that the consumers who individually held positive attitudes toward the product were more susceptible to influence from group opinion than those who initially held negative opinions. And when those with negative opinions of the product were involved in group discussions, they became even more negative.

Remind you of office politics, where back-room conversations grow angst and negativity, or township board meetings when single negative citizen speaking during public comments results in impromptu negative responses from other citizens who had no planned remarks before that negative speaker "inspired" them?

Twisted logic. A 2010 study by Rohit Aggarwal of the University of Utah, however, suggests that negative posts on social network pages and blogs can actually act as catalysts for reading about organizations and add to the perception of integrity. Aggarwal explains that visitors to websites or employee blogs expect to only see positive commentary on



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the organization. Critical commentary, therefore, is seen as reflecting the integrity of employees with openness and honesty about policies and services. If you want to monitor the "acceptable" level of negativity before your readers jump on the negative bandwagon, Aggarwal suggests no more than 15 to 20 percent negative comments. Considering the previous research on negativity being contagious, good luck with holding that ratio down!

It's all in your head. Using MRI technology, Tom Bowlby, a behavioral endocrinologist at the University of Maryland, reports that the part of the brain that responds to emotional pain is the same part that responds to physical pain. This means that, to the brain, emotional pain is just as detrimental as physical pain.

"Fairness" is also very important to the brain. A situation perceived as fair lights up the same part of the brain as seeing a loved one or tasting good food. Situations perceived as unfair light up the part of the brain that feels disgust. Positive experiences lead to the production of serotonin, a chemical in the brain that can improve performance. By fostering an environment of fairness, you not only make people happier, you improve their brain chemistry. This leads to better performance and increased morale.

So how can you do this at the township level? Give people answers. Explain the rationale behind decisions so people understand "why" decisions are made. Balance genuine praise with constructive criticism in the interest of learning and development. Provide recognition both internally with employees and to the public for their opinions and service. Implement consistent policies and practices that employees and the public can rely on.

Bowlby's research also concludes that prolonged stress will literally shrink your brain. How? Stress leads to the release of cortisol and cortisol shrinks the part of your brain that stores memory. Cortisol can also depress your mood, suppress your immune system, and shorten your life span. Uncertainty in the brain leads to fear and adrenaline overload. This reduces functioning and decision-making capabilities. ►

Since stress and uncertainty are culprits for memory problems, mood swings and indecision, take efforts to reduce stress both physically and mentally—for yourself *and* your township colleagues. Increase your aerobic activity and feed your brain more oxygen and serotonin, a mood-elevating drug. Provide people with clear information, even in negative situations, reducing uncertainty. Stop talking—and start making decisions!

Re-program your brain. Every time you do something, you make new connections in the brain related to that task and learn to get better at it. If you indulge in venting, you train your brain to vent and therefore train your brain to focus on negativity instead of problem-solving. Instead, train your brain to identify symptoms and solve problems. Identifying symptoms is logical and analytical. Determining root causes of issues helps you move into problem-solving mode.

Stop the negative cycle by asking others to come prepared with solutions when they pose problems. Give them control by involving them in problem-solving and decision-making. By focusing on the positives, you can halt a toxic environment, and create an atmosphere of respect and fairness where the township, employees and public thrive!

CHANGING NEGATIVITY IN ONESELF

To create an atmosphere of positivity in the township, officials must first choose a positive “self” before looking to change others. Here are 10 places you can start:

Watch your language. Literally. Listen to yourself. How often do you use all-or-nothing generalizations like “always,” “never” and “everybody says so”? Watch your language in writing as well. What does your signage communicate in township offices? Do you have signs posted that say “No cell phones”? How about rephrasing to “Please silence cell phones” or “Please enjoy your cell phone conversation after your business is completed.” How about changing “Do not put garbage in recycling bin” to “Please place only recyclables in recycling bin.”

Even township policy language can be adjusted. For example, instead of stating “no inspections scheduled without complete information,” try “When scheduling an inspection be prepared with the permit number, lot number and type of inspection requested in order to ensure timely response.”

Put “guilt” away. When using words like “should,” “must,” “ought to,” or “I have to,” you allow yourself to be manipulated by others. Instead, use phrases like “I choose to,” “yes,” “no,” and “I will” in order to take ownership of your own feelings and actions. Once you “choose” to do something, you will no longer be angry about those actions since you had the opportunity to “choose” differently if your actions give you heartburn!

Stop blaming, and take full responsibility. When you say or think, “It’s all your fault,” you become the victim. Instead, ask yourself what role you have in the situation. What can you do to support the other person’s efforts to act responsibly or reliably in the future? Provide support without removing responsibility when helping others achieve results. If others can more effectively influence others, let them effect the change. Become part of the solution.

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Use positive self-talk. Focus on your strengths. Rather than beating yourself up about your impatience with a demanding citizen, pat yourself on the back for addressing his or her needs. Then allow yourself some forgiveness if you made communication mistakes and move toward correcting them the next time around. If you didn't take time to read the meeting minutes before today's meeting and were called out on it by a citizen, mentally commit yourself to reading them before the next meeting and demonstrating your knowledge of the issues. When committing to self-improvement, use phrases like "I will ..." rather than "I will try ...".

Go beyond face value of feedback. Rather than responding to citizen or employee issues as the "truth" and immediately looking to resolve them, do both a gut check on whether you're responding to feelings before facts, and then look for evidence to support or challenge the perceptions presented. Question others. Question data. Fact-find. Check the source.

Avoid labeling. Rather than saying, "I'm beaten," focus on the issues that have gotten in the way of your success and address them. Rather than labeling others in a negative fashion, use language that more clearly identifies that generalization. "They're emotional on this issue." "They need more information." "They aren't ready to hear the other side." Identify specifically what is going on.

Keep your cup "half full." Energy follows intent. If we predict the cup is "half empty," we move toward that self-fulfilling prophecy by allowing ourselves to back off our efforts or give



Positive recognition reinforces performance—so recognize township officials, staff and volunteer efforts.

up before trying various approaches to getting things done. It's easier to keep your cup "half full" if you are fully informed about the issues, identify your best-case scenario as well as the minimally acceptable solution, and are clear and strong on your desired outcomes—but flexible on how those can be achieved.

Move from assumptions to knowledge. A sure way to build mistrust among your staff or the public is to assign motives to their behavior. Avoid mind-reading and instead *ask* what people are thinking! Before ending conversations, paraphrase back your understanding of their point of view to ensure that you truly do understand them. You'll find you listen more effectively if you challenge yourself to do this—and will build more positive working relationships in the process.

Challenge your—and others'—mental models. We see issues based on our own experiences. As a result, when we disagree, often it's due to not only seeing things differently, but incompletely. When faced with a conflict, refrain from pushing your point of view. Instead, ask others how they see the issues. Ask them to tell you more. Once you've heard their "story" or they've heard yours, you'll often find greater understanding and be able to move toward agreement more easily.

Disagree in an agreeable manner. What is worse than disagreeing is feeling disrespected in the process. You don't want working relationships damaged by a disagreement that ends in a full-blown dispute. Think about the following guidelines in managing yourself as well as working with others through tough situations:

Them: Give others the right to their feelings, and recognize aggressive behavior as others needing control. Give them a little of that control, and give others your full attention, letting them vent briefly while listening carefully, and react below their level of intensity. Others will tend to mirror your actions so keeping calm will actually help level-set others.

You: Calm yourself by managing your physical reactions to conflict and negativity. Be prepared for others pushing your "hot buttons" so you don't overreact, and empathize with ►



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others to show understanding (but not necessarily agreement). Be ready to move to problem-solving mode. Focus on where you agree with others early in the conversation to set the stage for agreements later. Do not go from empathizing to using the word “but” as you bridge to your point of view—you will negate any good will you built while actively listening. And finally, breathe so you can think clearly.

Agree or agree to disagree? When others are entrenched in their views, don’t debate with them. Reflect back their views out of respect. Share your view of the situation. And if there is no sign of listening, consistent rebuttals or an unwillingness to compromise, respectfully disagree and don’t engage any further. Phrases like “we respectfully disagree” are good ways to end conversations under those circumstances.

THE NEXT STEPS

You’ve committed to “just say no” to negativity (a bit of an oxymoron, isn’t it?)—so what’s next? Be prepared to address negativity in the workplace. Gary Topchik, author of *Managing Workplace Negativity*, states in a *Management Review* article that “negativity is often the result of a loss of confidence, control or community.” Identifying not only the issues, but also how widespread the issues are is the first step in resolving the problem.

Here are some tips on how to minimize workplace negativity, which in some cases can also be used to promote a culture of positivity among the community as a whole:

Prevent negativity by providing opportunities for people to make decisions about and control or influence their jobs, public policy, and key decisions about their community. Any decision that excludes input from key stakeholders is likely to be perceived negatively. Changes on the horizon? Communicate why there is a need for change and then involve those impacted on how to navigate and implement the changes.

Develop—and then enforce—consistent policies. If you find that your “frontline” township employees are constantly being trumped in policy enforcement by department heads, the board may wish to review those policies and make changes. Going over employees’ heads, resulting in inconsistent enforcement of policy, not only undermines your employees, but gives the signal to the public that policy is meaningless and bypassing the chain of command gets results.

Share what you can, as soon as you can. Knowledge is power, and so conversely, lack of knowledge can leave your township staff feeling disempowered. Officials and township decision-makers must fully communicate with employees. Provide context for decisions made. Communicate in person first followed by email, not vice versa. Encourage questions—and admit when you don’t have answers.

Support decision-makers. Telling employees that they “have to” go along with changes made by elected officials immediately undermines the initiative. Instead, make sure everyone fully understands the intent of changes, the rationale for change, and supports the decisions. Otherwise, officials may be tacitly sabotaging the efforts and feeding anxiety about the direction the township is taking. The reality is, once decisions have been made and announced publicly, it’s unlikely they will be re-negotiated, so even if it’s unpopular, get it done and move on. Don’t feed the victim mentality!

Manage workload. Both over-work as a result of downsizing or poor scheduling, and under-work leading to boredom result in workplace negativity. Engage township staff in brainstorming roles and responsibilities when not dictated by law.

Develop your people. Give township employees the opportunity to grow and develop, whether through professional development opportunities, site visits to other communities or cross-training. Such actions demonstrate the township’s commitment to them. And don’t forget township board and committee members. Often newly elected or appointed officials are unsure of the mechanics of township government, so encourage training—such as that offered by the Michigan Townships Association—for them, too.

Recognize efforts. Recognition reinforces performance. Recognize township official, staff and volunteer efforts. Remember the brain studies? Release a little serotonin with some acknowledgment and praise.

Provide a “safe” working environment. Current research tells us that employees generally no longer leave organizations, they leave bosses. Therefore, ensure that township employees have supervision that is approachable, genuine, willing to take calculated risks, empowers employees and the public, encourages ownership of jobs, and doesn’t micromanage. Be the boss, colleague and citizen with whom others want to work.

A culture of positivity can spread throughout the entire community—inspiring area businesses and residents and re-affirming their commitment to their township. Whether managing negativity at the personal or township level, start today by building a culture that “just says ‘no’ to negativity!” ■

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Ohle will be conducting a two-part “Office Politics” Pre-Conference Track on Tuesday, Jan. 24 at the Detroit Marriott Renaissance Center. Sessions include: Office Politics: Rumor or Reality, and Working Together Despite Differences. The following day, join Ohle for Building Community and Building Positive Relationships.