



7 ways to tackle negativity in the workplace

By Jessica Hubbard, 24 June 2022

As finance teams negotiate their way through the volatility and stress triggered by the ongoing pandemic and global challenges, some leaders may channel their own negativity and frustration into the work environment.

Unless proactively identified and addressed, this negativity can seep into the workplace culture and ultimately harm the organisation if it becomes a longstanding or widespread factor.

"It is so important to identify any negativity in the workplace as soon as it manifests because it affects team cohesion, and can be an impediment to achieving goal congruence," said Ifeoma Okonkwo, ACMA, CGMA, and director of finance at MG Entertainment Nigeria Ltd.

Many people are avoiding challenging issues, said Alexandra Efthymiades, director at Consensio, a team of conflict mediation practitioners based in London.

"Many leaders simply go into avoidance mode because they are fearful of addressing something with a colleague or manager. It could also be that they feel they do not have the skills to do so and might feel clumsy if they try and address difficult issues," she said.

FM magazine spoke to Okonkwo, Efthymiades, and Nikki Wild, ACMA, CGMA, director and owner of Wild Empowerment Ltd., a UK-based coaching firm, to find out how leaders can identify and tackle workplace negativity before it becomes embedded in the culture. Their advice includes:

Have courageous conversations. As with any relationship, if issues fester for too long, resentment can set in and the relationship or team dynamic can ultimately break down.

Efthymiades suggested that leaders talk about issues when they first arise and to do so informally first (and by not always having to rely on human resources professionals to have these conversations on your behalf).

"Being assertive and direct is critical, but you must remain respectful," she added. "Maybe somebody is late because they have a personal crisis. Or maybe they are copying HR into emails because they are scared for their job, or they feel someone is trying to trip them up."

If managers always default to including HR, they risk losing out on key opportunities to develop conflict resolution skills which are critical to strong leadership, Efthymiades noted.

Develop strategies for self-examination. If leaders fall into repetitive negative habits and attitudes, they can quickly become ingrained and embedded — and these behaviours can become harder to dislodge from the organisation later on, Wild cautioned.

Examples of negative behaviours include gossiping, showing up late, procrastinating, and shifting blame onto colleagues or managers, she said. Leaders also need to be very aware of how their own fears, bad habits, and negative emotions can trickle down into the culture. Negativity from the top very easily cascades down onto teams and individuals, she said.

There are various ways to begin to develop self-awareness of one's negative patterns, Efthymiades said. One way is to engage in leadership coaching and to work closely with a trusted mentor. She also recommended that leaders harness professional assessments and questionnaires to increase their self-awareness about how they manage conflict, and to increase their skills and confidence to deal with challenging workplace issues. For example, leaders can use the Thomas-Kilmann Instrument (TKI), an assessment tool designed to measure a person's behaviour in conflict situations, to learn more about their conflict style.

Emphasise collaboration. One thing to pay attention to is if a team member is withdrawn and isolated from other team members. While this could be explained through personalities and working tendencies, team members with shifts toward silo mentalities — avoiding collaboration and clear communication with others, for instance — can lead co-workers to see one another as competitors instead of collaborators, Okonkwo said.

"An unwillingness to share information or knowledge between colleagues and/or across departments is considered negative and is ultimately detrimental to a company's success," Okonkwo said. "Culture alignment and constant collaboration are key elements to ensuring that negativity does not become pervasive within the organisation."

According to Wild, one way to tackle the silo mentality is by encouraging teams to get to know one another outside of their professional roles. It's also important to ensure that a toxic work culture isn't what's prompting the scenario.

"Find out about each other, learn to share positive things from your daily lives and work, and really make an effort to get to know your colleagues beyond their job titles," she said. "This will re-create the bonds of trust and will make collaboration far easier and more enjoyable."

Efthymiades added that creating opportunities for teams to spend informal and relaxed time together within the work environment can also boost empathy and bring people closer together.

"Leaders can also bring in expert speakers, for example, who can delve into certain topics and encourage teams to discuss the topic and reflect on the shared experience."

Avoid blame. In addition, Efthymiades said that there is something immensely powerful about not blaming other people when things are negative or seem toxic.

"First consider how your own behaviour might be contributing to the issue," she said. "Are you potentially doing something that is bothering a colleague, boss, or someone you manage? By having a dialogue, you will open yourself to a different point of view, but you must be open to what the other person will have to say."

She again emphasised the importance of developing self-awareness of one's patterns in a conflict situation. If you immediately default to blame, you miss out on valuable opportunities for learning

and self-development, she cautioned. In addition, leaders can create an organisational culture of blame and toxicity if they do not learn to recognise their default patterns.

Examine your assumptions. When we are experiencing negativity in the workplace, we often jump to our own conclusions, which can have little basis in reality, Efthymiades said.

We might feel that our manager does not like us or wants to get rid of us, or we might feel that our colleague is doing something behind our back to get the promotion we are both applying for. This negativity can quickly escalate and become self-perpetuating, she said.

"By creating opportunities and channels for regular feedback and input from others, leaders can begin to tackle and challenge their own assumptions," Efthymiades explained. "The important thing is to avoid making key decisions in a vacuum, and by asking yourself, 'Is this something that is real, or am I just making it up in my head?'"

When creating channels for routine feedback and assessment, Efthymiades said that the feedback should be anonymous and allow for authentic and honest input.

Pay attention to language. To identify where negativity lies, Wild recommended paying close attention to the language that co-workers use.

"It is not necessarily the explicit sentences ... more often it's the throwaway remarks or side comments that give us the clues and insights into how someone is feeling," Wild said.

For example, when a co-worker utters, "I'll believe it when I see it," those negative comments are signposts to deeper issues under the surface.

In addition, with remote working, when we cannot rely on physical cues, listening to language becomes even more important.

According to Efthymiades, there are some practical and powerful ways of changing our language to improve our workplace relationships.

For example, making it personal can leave the person feeling either attacked or blamed. Rather, phrase it by saying what you've noticed.

"And then it is important to be specific," she said. "Instead of saying, 'You are always late,' say something like, 'I have noticed that during the past two meetings you were late.'"

The next step, Efthymiades said, is to explain the impact the behaviour has on you or the team. If you say, "You make me feel disrespected," the person might feel you are attacking them or blaming them. They will either defend themselves or attack. But approaching the issue in a less judgemental way can allow for a respectful conversation.

Document the issues. Particularly with remote working, many finance teams aren't taking the opportunities to check in and have honest conversations about what's working and what's not, said Wild. She recommended that once a month, teams create "helper" and "hinderer" lists consisting of two columns that detail specific issues that may be impacting the overall culture.

"This list creates the opportunity to disclose elements that are inhibiting the team dynamic, as well as those that are supportive and working well," she said.

This exercise can guide team members to start with the simple things that can make a quick and positive impact. For example, if someone feels they are always left to wash up the coffee mugs, a team member can offer to do the washing up if their colleague is in a rush.

"It is often the very simple things that can rebuild a positive climate and sense of cohesion amongst teams," said Wild. "By working on this list on a monthly or biweekly basis, then everyone becomes part of the solution and feels empowered to make the necessary changes."