Is your workplace filled with negativity?

"Man, summer vacation flew by like a dream! Now it's back to the same old grind."

"Tell me about it! Is it just me or does this place get drearier every autumn?"

"I hear Simmons got the boot for beaking-off to Carleton. Anyone else hear that?"

"Simmons always did have a big yap. Not that I'd wish Carleton on my worst enemy…"

"Sheila is such a pain; always on somebody's case about something…"

"Could be worse. They could send that manager from central office in to oversee again. Talk about a nag!"

"You hear we're getting that new supervisor! Heard the guy's a total Nazi…"

"Hey Sharms, looks like you put on the big pounds during summer. On a pizza diet, or what?"

"I thought they said they were upgrading!

Talk is cheap around here, is all I can say…"

"Yeah and then they'll send in some presenter to lecture us about safety when they don't even…"

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Margret Mead

Sound familiar?

Try thinking of your workplace as a swimming pool, and that the negativity we contribute to it daily invisibly pollutes the water, complaint by complaint, gossip by gossip, slander by slander. What does it take to change the water?

How does positivity add to the quality of the pool your own children swim in?

Would you fill your home-pool with it?

Is there a positive way you could address workplace issues?

To generate actual change?

If it feels hopeless, is it because of the lenses we're looking through, the attitudes we choose?

We can't always change our situation, but we can change how we think about it.

Do we have options we're not yet aware of?

How do you contribute to the water your co-workers are swimming in daily, weekly, monthly, yearly?

We've all heard about stress in the workplace.

How does that come about?

Work is, by definition, difficult. That's why the performance of a job is called work, and why we're paid to do it, and if benefits are still a part of our job, we're fortunate. They won't be there for many of our children. So how do we change our attitude to one of gratitude?

How do we help to reduce the atmosphere and improve the quality of the pool? We become more aware of the bigger picture. We become more aware of when we're getting ready to contaminate the water, and we don't. When others are getting the gossip-train rolling, we can choose to get off or get on. What will we contribute and what will the outcome of our choices be?

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For many, September is a time of returning to work after the summer vacation season. Admittedly, many people return to work begrudgingly. This is perfectly understandable since we have to let go of spending time outside in the nice weather with friends and family— in addition to letting go of the fun or leisurely lifestyle afforded by our well-earned summer vacation.

Unfortunately, feeling like this can result in unhealthy, unsatisfying and even toxic work environments. That atmosphere can make the work place less safe mentally, emotionally, and physically. It can also, over the long term, cause both mental and physical illnesses.

Consequently, it is important that individual employees understand that it is up to each of us to help foster a healthy, comfortable and even positive environment. We can accomplish this through the choices we make for ourselves and with others.

The issue is that most people have to work; therefore why not choose behaviours and attitudes that make work as satisfying as possible for all involved? This does not mean trying to be everybody's best friend or even going out of your way for others. It simply involves some common sense behaviour and awareness.

This is important because the more people are satisfied with work and the work environment, the more likely there will be a positive environment overall.

For this reason, it is essential to point out some important issues about which individuals and groups can be made aware to help improve and maintain a healthier workplace morale.

Awareness. The first, and probably the most important, is awareness. People need to be aware that they have options and choices in terms of how they behave and that those choices can have a tremendous effect both for themselves and others. We get into routines and become unconscious of our behaviour. That is when undesirable behaviours have a chance to creep in without knowing that's happening. Likely we've all experienced someone who appears angry and have asked if everything is okay. We know it is unintended if that person responds "I didn't realize that I had a scowl on my face."

The point is that often we can behave in unconscious fashion. It is encouraging for individuals to know that they all can have influence over the work environment and morale at the job site. This is especially true if everyone takes responsibility and incorporates some basic strategies which can help.

These are some suggestions for creating an enjoyable atmosphere at work:

Civility and Respect. Civility and respect are fundamental to a satisfying work environment. A workplace where employees are respectful and considerate in their interactions with one another is both safe and satisfying. Civility and respect are based on showing those with whom you interact basic respect, care and consideration, in addition to acknowledging each one's dignity. We all have the right to be treated in a dignified manner.

A civil and respectful workplace is important because it is associated with greater job satisfaction, greater perceptions of fairness, a more positive attitude, improved morale, better teamwork, greater interest in personal development, engagement in problem resolution, enhanced supervisor-staff relationships, and reduction in sick leave and turnover. It creates a positive atmosphere and better productivity. Most people would prefer to work in this type of environment.

A workplace which lacks civility and respect can become a place where problems and issues are allowed to fester. For example, such work sites are associated with emotional exhaustion among staff, a higher incidence of conflicts and job withdrawal, formation of cliques and other undesirable interactions. A work environment that is uncivil and disrespectful also exposes organizations to the threat of more grievances and legal risks. Individuals who work in an environment without civility and respect are prone to psychological complaints, depression, burnout, anxiety, aggression, psychosomatic complaints and musculoskeletal health complaints. Civility and respect begin with each individual.

What is civility? It can be defined as claiming and caring for one's identity, needs and beliefs without degrading someone else's in the process. Civility includes politeness but it is also about the capacity to disagree with another without showing disrespect or abrasiveness. A person who is civil looks for and focuses on common ground as a starting point for dialogue. Civility involves staying present and respectful even with those individuals that we may have disagreements or those who with whom we are in competition.

What is respect? Respect can be broken down into two components.

1) Respect shows how you feel about a person. Having respect for someone means you consciously acknowledge and think good things about that person. When it comes to co-workers, consider focussing on positive thoughts. Perhaps that co-worker is a hard worker, a good mother or father, or demonstrates strength in dealing with life's struggles.

2) Respect influences how you respond and behave towards a person. Showing respect to someone means you act in a way that shows you care about his or her feelings and well-being. It also means showing regard and appreciation for that person's worth. This acknowledges the rights and dignity of all persons, and respect for the environment which sustains life, the equipment that allows us to do our work and feed our families. Perhaps the best way to view respect is behaving in ways which keep us from hurting what deserves consideration and value. Everybody has a story and everybody deserves to be honoured for the human being he or she is with challenges and victories which are part of the human experience.

Simple ways to demonstrate respect to co-workers in the workplace:

Say hello. If someone offers you a greeting, then offer one in return. You don't have to become anyone's best friend. A simple nod or smile can often be enough to make a positive interaction.

Be friendly. This one is obvious, but sometimes we get caught up in our own concerns and unconsciously behave in a manner which appears cold and closed to others. This might send the wrong message to your co-workers (and could be the reason they're not so friendly toward you). Remember to address co-workers by name, say "Good morning" and "Good evening." This can help create a positive environment which helps you to get through your difficulties with a little more grace and possibly even inspires support.

Also remember that even small gestures can make a big difference for a person's day and workplace morale. Giving a hand to a co-worker

who has fallen behind or cleaning up a bit in an area where clutter is a safety issue are actions which demonstrate respect for everybody in the environment. Taking time before starting any interaction to ask "How are you?" and genuinely showing interest in the answer can also be effective in showing respect and civility.

Avoid negativity. When we are being negative we are creating a unhealthy internal environment. The point is a negative attitude is not good for your health and it is not good for the well-being of those around you. We need to be conscious of how positive or negative we are being so that we can behave appropriately.

Listen. Sometimes just being a good listener can go a long way. Rushing to get your own ideas out there can cause colleagues to feel you don't value their opinions. Show respect and listen to their suggestions or thoughts. This means trying to engage in a conversation instead of attempting to dominate and acting like the conversation is a competition.

Don't avoid the problem. If you have a co-worker whom you can't stand or who can't stand you, it's important that you continue to work constructively with that person. If conflict is arising, talk to the colleague to find out what you can do to resolve the problem.

Avoid gossiping or saying negative things about co-workers. Saying something negative about a co-worker is one of the fastest ways to get caught up in workplace drama.

Be grateful. Thank your co-workers for their contributions and their help, even when you believe it is part of their job descriptions anyway. We all like to feel appreciated. Showing gratitude is likely to make co-workers want to go above and beyond for you in the future.

Adjust your communication style by personality type and don't take things personally. Often it helps to consider the person that you're dealing with before each interaction. For instance, some people prefer to have more of a personal relationship and spend time chatting. Others prefer that communication be kept short and to the point. Remember to use the most appropriate style of communication.

Take care of yourself. By living a balanced healthy lifestyle, a person is more likely to be in a positive mood. Allowing yourself to become burned out, unhappy or wallow in low in self-esteem makes it much harder to relate to others in a healthy fashion.

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