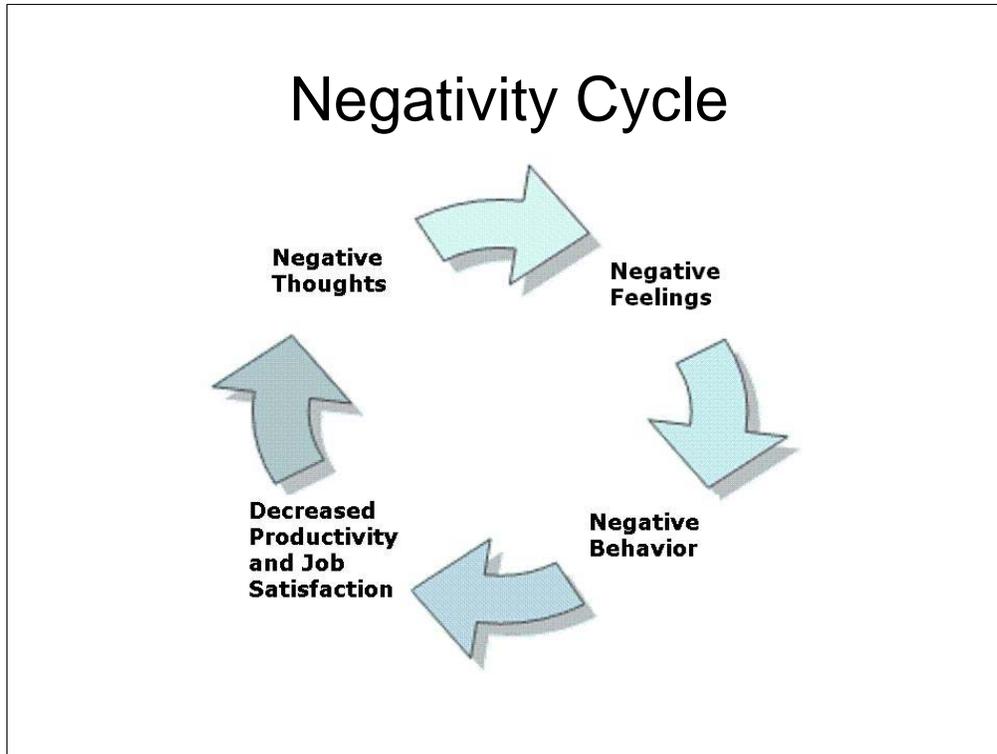Welcome to our presentation on Managing Negative Attitudes in the workplace. This presentation will be given by Steven Graham, Danielle Rogacki, Casey Schumann & Tim Zuberbier.

Outline

- The negativity cycle
- Types of negative thinking and how it can impact the workplace
- How to assess for negative attitudes
- Identification of negative attitudes
- How to confront negative attitudes
- How to break the cycle

In this presentation we will discuss the "Cycle of Negativity", types of negative thinking, how to assess, identify and address these negative attitudes. With this information we can set a goal of breaking the negativity cycle, should it occur.

Negativity Cycle

Negative
Thoughts

Negative
Feelings

Negative
Behavior

Decreased
Productivity
and Job
Satisfaction

There are some people who seem determined to point out the negative, or potential negative, of any situation. This can start with a negative thought, kept to oneself. Or, that thought can take root and grow into negative feelings. Some people are able to keep those thoughts and feelings internal, but in others those feelings manifest themselves through changes in behavior. Changes in behavior can affect both the negative person's productivity and job satisfaction, and can spill over to affect the productivity and job satisfaction of coworkers.

As managers, we obviously cannot control a person's thoughts, but we do have a responsibility to the people and programs we manage to address behavior that affects the individuals and the team.

Negativity Cycle

Negative Thoughts

Negative Feelings

Negative Behavior

Decreased Productivity and Job Satisfaction
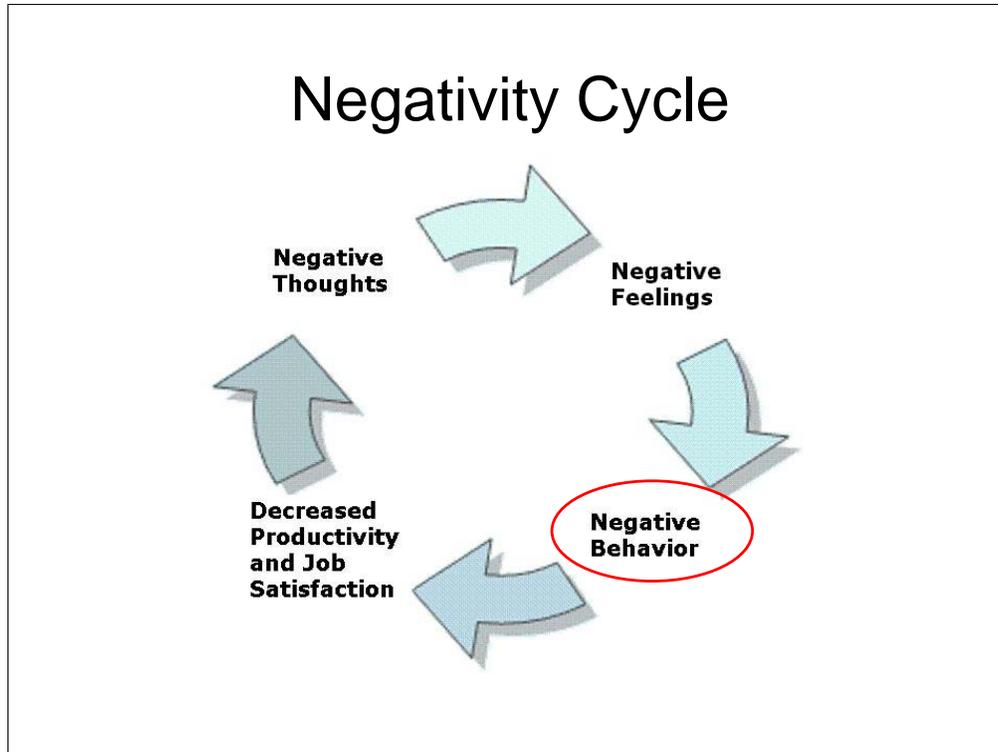
We've probably all met people who will counter positive news with a negative comment. For example, a person may be pleased to get a raise in pay, only to have "Mr. Negativity" comment about having to pay extra taxes on the additional income. In another situation, a person may be excited to try out a new idea, only to have "Ms. Naysayer" tell the person the idea has been tried before and will never work.

In our private lives we can take steps to avoid contact with people like that, and avoid their negative behavior. In the work place we do not always have that option. When the cycle transitions to the "Negative Behavior" stage, the manager should begin taking steps to address the behavior and keep the team on track.

A manager should be aware of characteristics of negative thinking…

Five Characteristics of Negative Thinking

- **Focusing on the negative**—This happens when individuals focus entirely on a a single negative aspect of an experience. A variation of this thinking can be dismissing and devaluing positive experiences.
- **All or nothing thinking**—All or nothing thinking looks at things in a black and white perspective. Frequently this involves a perception about an event or person's reaction that has no basis in fact. Most experiences in life fall somewhere between all good and all bad. If a person thinks only in extremes, they will often feel bad for no real reason.
- **Overgeneralization and labeling**—Individuals engaging this thought pattern can see a single negative event as a continuous pattern of defeat. In its most extreme form, this thinking attaches a negative label to oneself or others. For example, if a person makes one mistake, they may be branded a loser.
- **Jumping to conclusions**—This thinking involves imagining other people's negative reactions, and imagining negative outcomes with no basis in fact.
- **Personalization and blame**—This happens when a person holds oneself, someone else, or something else entirely responsible for an event. This can lead to making heavy or unrealistic demands on oneself and others.

This slide describes some characteristics of negative thinking that can fuel the negativity cycle. We will use an example scenario of a successful web site deployment project to describe how negative thinking can obscure reality. Company XYZ has just had a successful deployment of a new web site. Everyone involved should be feeling good about the project, but negativity has crept in…

•The only thing Joe remembers about the project is a delay at the mid point of the project. By focusing on the negative he is missing that the project was successful

•One of the board members saw the web site and didn't like the color scheme. No one else shared his opinion, and the project was a success, but his focus on the color scheme didn't allow him to see the success. The board member displayed all or nothing thinking by ignoring the technical aspect of the success and calling the project a failure just because of the colors used.

•Judy worked on the web project and was responsible for verifying accuracy of the data. An unforeseen change in the requirements caused Judy to make an error that wasn't her fault. Unfortunately, she told herself she "always" makes mistakes and started calling herself "error prone". Her thoughts are an example of over generalizing and labeling.

•In the meantime, Jane assumed the problem was her fault and jumped to the conclusion that the delay that Joe was focusing on was her fault.

•Finally, Charlie is looking for someone to blame. Delays shouldn't happen and it has to be someone's fault…

As shown in the scenario above, there is overlap in the negative thought traits. Unfortunately, the rather than celebrating a success, many on the team are feeling discouraged because of the various negative thoughts they encountered or heard.

The key for the manager is to pick up on which trait, or combination of traits, are affecting the staff….

How this affects the workforce

- Wasted time
- Hindered creativity and innovation
- Loss of good employees
- Lower morale
- Loss of loyalty

Decreased Productivity
Negative Impact on Consumers
Potential Financial Impact

Our web application scenario shows how the satisfaction of successfully completing a task can be overwhelmed by negative attitudes. We see how negative thinking can lead to negative behavior, which can wear down individuals. Negative staff members can steal the joy of their coworkers. Negative employees can drain the energy of those around them. They can leave others feeling dissatisfied and unhappy with their situation, even though the situation may be otherwise pleasant.

A work team's plans and goals can be sabotaged if the team members start believing what the negative coworker says about expected failure. Even modest goals can be hampered by a negative mindset. Team members can start second guessing themselves, or stop trying altogether. They no longer feel good about themselves, their coworkers, or their employers and quality of work can suffer.

Time is wasted when individuals start dwelling on perceived problems. Time is also wasted when negative gossip starts ad hoc "gripe sessions" that do nothing other than intensify negativity.

Staff members who are sensitive to negative criticism may start to hold back their own creative ideas out of fear of ridicule. Other employees with marketable skills may decide it's in their best interest to leave the situation entirely. The employees that are left behind continue to loose morale and their sense of loyalty to the organization is diminished.

The loss of productive employees, low morale of remaining employees, and hindered creativity will result in decreased productivity and loss of service to the customer base.

As we have stated already, managers cannot control another person's thoughts, but they can intervene to break away from the "Negativity Cycle"…

Break away from the cycle
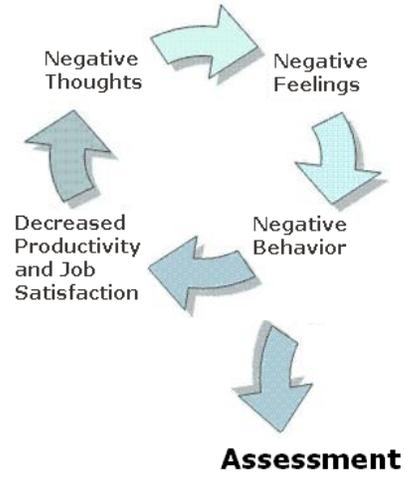
At this point the manager should step in and begin assessing the negative behavior and address that behavior to break the cycle…

Non est mea culpa!

It's not my fault!

Assessing the supervisor

- What would your co-workers say about you?
- What would your boss say about you?
- What would you say about you?

Purpose of assessing yourself is to determine that you are not creating the problem and are not unfairly blaming anyone else.   Make sure you are not overreacting or being overly sensitive.

- It's not you, it's me.

  »George Costanza, *Seinfeld*

DO I ??????

- Offer praise and positive feedback? ⟷ • Criticize and condescend?
- Create harmony? ⟷ • Create division?
- Listen? ⟷ • Interrupt? Change subject?

- Motivate? ⟷ • Sap Energy?
- Reserve judgment? ⟷ • Pass judgment?
- Teat everyone fairly and on the basis of merit? ⟷ • Show favoritism?

This is how the supervisor might evaluate themselves.

Breaking the cycle
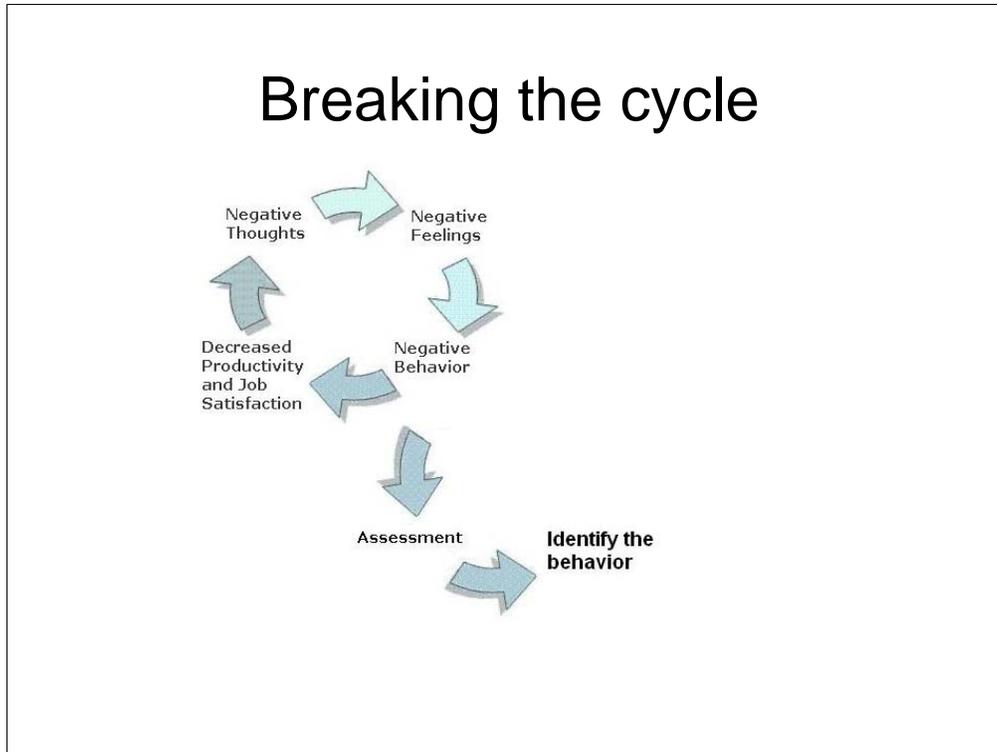
After doing an analysis of yourself and you determine you are not creating the problem. You then need to identify the negative behavior the employee is exhibiting to address it. All negative behaviors come from one of the following drivers of human behavior

        Need for Appreciation

        Need for Acceptance

        Fear of Rejection

        The next two slides will be some examples of some negative behaviors you may seem exhibited in the workplace. They will also address some immediate strategies to deal with the behavior.

Aggressive behaviors

Sherman Tank

Exploder

Backstabber

Firefighter

Complainers/Whiners

First some of the behaviors that seem to be more aggressive.

1. Sherman Tank – These individuals criticize everyone, are very argumentative, believe there is only one right way and display anger to show power. Usually comes from a need for attention and control. They feed on power. Some tactics to deal with these individuals in the short term would be to use their name and don't panic.

2. Exploder – Individuals who are exploders usually have tantrums and uncontrollable outbursts. They do this because they usually don't know any other way. You should confront these individuals and deal with them privately.

3. Backstabber – Behaviors associated with backstabbers include making promises but not delivering and telling lies. These are usually pot stirrers. They are not looking for control but want something from you and they may want to embarrass you to get it. To deal with backstabbers, know your goals (not theirs), get allies in the organization and never threaten.

4. The complainer/whiner – These individuals accuse others, gripe about everything and just have a general attitude that everything is wrong. They see the world as out of control and themselves powerless. Listen to these individuals, don't argue but try to get them to problem solve—don't solve the problem for them but try to work with them so they can solve their own problem.

5. Firefighters – This individual wants to be the hero and needs to feel important. They look for disasters and their priorities may seem irrational. To deal with them state the real priorities and acknowledge them but don't emphasize.

Information from "Who are Difficult People" handout from the Managing Difficult, Angry and Marginal People class on January 14, 2010 taught by Gregg Miller.

Passive behaviors

Clam

Bureaucrat

Lone Wolf

Deadwood

Staller

Some negative behaviors can be more passive; that is you don't have individuals shouting or throwing tantrums but they still are having a negative impact in their own way. Some of these types of behaviors include:

1. The Clam – this individual is unresponsive and may have malicious obedience—that is they give the one word yes/no response. The clam may be trying to set you or others up. To deal with these it is best to try to ask open ended questions.

2. Lone wolf – The lone wolf is an expert with an attitude. They are competent but they need to always be right. You need to do your homework when dealing with a lone wolf, confront them privately and present alternatives.

3. Bureaucrat – These individuals site the rules and regulations on why you can or can't do something. They usually have a feeling of being powerless. To deal with the bureaucrat be sure you know the rules and regulations.

4. Staller – The staller is the one who can never make a decision. They want to do what is right but may not be able to trust themselves. You can assist them in the decision making process.

5. Deadwood - This individual just doesn't contribute. To deal with this understand their role and try being assertive.

Information from "Who are Difficult People" handout from the Managing Difficult, Angry and Marginal People class on January 14, 2010 taught by Gregg Miller.

Breaking the cycle
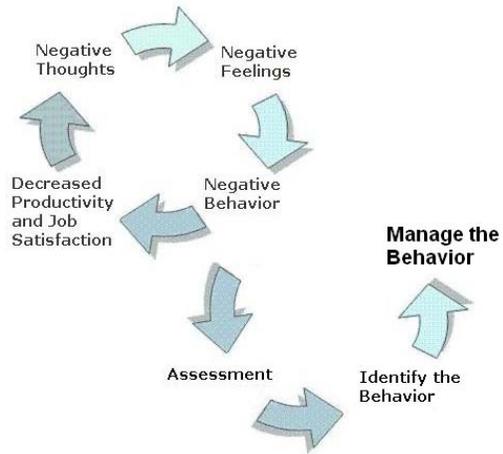
Once you have assessed the negative attitude and behavior to determine that it's not you as the supervisor, that others have noticed the same behavior, and you have changed your usual response to the behavior, the supervisor needs to manage and confront the behavior to prevent it from happening again.

Confronting the Behavior

1. Confront behavior before performance becomes an issue
2. Develop a plan
3. Choose the appropriate time/place to confront the behavior:
   a. Do not confront/criticize in public
   b. Choose neutral territory
   c. Allow enough time for a complete discussion

1) Most people wait too long to confront negative behaviors, usually when performance is an issue. Ideally the behaviors would be confront while performance is still good to prevent those negative impacts mentioned earlier.

2) Develop a strategy for dealing with the person– what will you say when you confront them? Some experts even recommend practicing what you will say in advance.

3) Decide when/where to address the individual. a) Public criticism humiliates the subject and threatens the manager/employee relationship. Have the discussion in private. b) do not choose a place where you have the upper hand. C) Make sure you have scheduled enough time for the discussion.

Confronting the Behavior

3. Adopt the appropriate attitude:
    a. Stay calm
    b. Be firm and assertive (not aggressive!)
    c. Focus on the behavior
    d. Be concise
4. Set up consequences
    a. Set goals for change
    b. Follow through on pre-established consequences

3) a. Individuals can't protect themselves and learn at the same time. Staying calm creates a non-threatening environment where listening, thinking and learning can occur. b. When confronting the behavior, be firm about what you want, and expect, to happen. Do not be aggressive, which is an emotional and tends to place blame on the individual. c. Focus the discussion on the impact of the behavior on the work environment and not on the person. d. the more concisely you can express yourself, the more likely it will be that the person will listen to, and understand what you are saying. The message will get lost if you say too much.

4) i.e. what will happen if negative behavior continues. a) Develop specific, time-limited, measurable goals for change. Better yet, get the employee involved in setting his/her own goals and solutions. Employee ownership will improve the likelihood of success. Write goals down for accountability. b) Follow through on consequences if goals are not met or negative behavior continues.

Confronting the Behavior

5. Reinforce positive behavior
6. Listen (don't assume, give employee a change to explain his/her side)
7. Stick to issues you can control (work behavior and performance) and refer employee to the Employee Assistance Program to address underlying issues

5) Praise the employee both privately and publicly to acknowledge and reinforce positive behavior, point out examples of good behavior among other employees so the individual has something to model
6) Listen to employees and let them explain themselves. Don't make assumptions about the underlying cause of the difficult behavior.
7) You can try to get at the underlying issues, but mostly likely, the reasons are beyond your control as a manager. Stick to what you can influence, which is the individual's behavior, and performance at work, and refer the employee to the EAP to address any underlying issues.

Confronting the Behavior

8. Repeat discussion as necessary
9. Have follow-up meetings to discuss improvements/progress on objectives
10. Some things can't be fixed

8) Don't expect instant results. Aim for incremental improvement versus instantaneous success.

9) Similar to #8, the problem won't be solved with just one meeting. Continue to follow-up with the employee on their progress toward the objectives, both positive and/or negative

10) Some behaviors might not be able to be changed, in which case be sure that all conversations, objectives and progress are documented.

Break the cycle
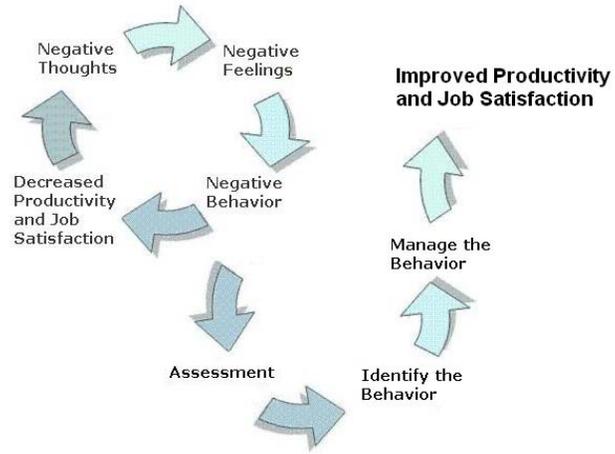
By assessing, identifying and managing negative attitudes it will lead to higher morale, better productivity and improved job satisfaction

References

- Skillsport Courses:
  - Difficult People in the Workplace Environment

• Skillport

- ✓ Job Aid - Challenging Negative Thinking
- ✓ Job Aid - Coping with Negative, Whiny People
- ✓ SkillBrief - Maintaining a Positive Attitude at Work
- ✓ SkillBrief - Recognizing Negative Thinking
- ✓ SkillBrief - Challenging Negative Thinking

- January 2010 EMDA session on difficult employees by Gregg Miller