

Negativity: The Stealth Contagion

Seemingly harmless bitching can slowly chip away at morale. Here's how to shut down the chronic complainers.

BY TIM DIETZ, MA, LPC

The thing I miss most about the fire service (besides my afternoon naps) is the camaraderie I shared with my coworkers. We had a common mission, and we stood in the trenches side by side. Together, we made a positive impact on people's lives. Sometimes, no matter how hard we tried, we didn't achieve the desired outcome. Still, we had each other's backs. We laughed together, sometimes shed tears, but our goals remained the same: Give Mrs. Smith our best effort, be safe and have fun.

Lately, I've been frustrated to hear my firefighter clients say they no longer enjoy going to work because their fire station has become toxic. We can attribute a lot of this toxicity to the fact that firefighters often struggle with change. This can lead to frustration, frustration can lead to irritation, and irritation can lead to anger. Soon, our safe places, e.g., the kitchen table or day room, no longer provide refuge from work and life stressors; rather, they become a source of strife. There is a lot going on these days: politics, pandemics, home-schooling, taxes, civil unrest, etc., and many of us have strong opinions on some or all of these issues, and we might feel compelled to share these opinions. I'm not talking about occasional, therapeutic bitching, but chronic, continued negativity.

We all know that a single chronic bitcher can bring the whole shift down if left unchecked. Sigal Barsade, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and a notable researcher in the area of *emotional contagion*, has found that groups catch emotions, and that one member's bad or good mood infects the rest of the group in significant ways. Even further, she says, "Groups develop common emotions called *group affect*,"¹ meaning one incessant complainer can spoil an entire crew. These folks not only make going to work onerous, but they can impact productivity. I shared this information with my wife, who forwarded the following anecdote:

If you go to the Southwest desert and catch 100 red fire ants as well as 100 large black ants and put them in a jar, at first, nothing will happen.

However, if you violently shake the jar and dump the ants on the ground, the ants will fight until they eventually kill each other.

The red ants think the black ants are the enemy and vice versa, but in reality, the real enemy is the person who shook the jar.

—Author Unknown

This may be what is happening in some firehouses today. It's not the workplace as a whole that is toxic, but the person shaking the proverbial jar. In our situation, this person is any firefighter who comes to work and is allowed to complain chronically or voice their toxic opinions continually. Working among these grumblers can decrease job satisfaction and productivity, increase stress levels, impact sleep and trigger negative attitudes in others.

In an article about workplace conflict, Abby Curnow-Chavez, a partner with The Trispective Group, writes:

"We've studied thousands of teams and collected data across all industries,

sectors, and geographies to learn what makes some teams high performers and what makes others fail. Our research indicates that the single most important factor in team success or failure is the quality of relationships on the team. In fact, 70 percent of the variance between the lowest-performing teams and highest-performing teams correlates to the quality of team relationships—not some or most of the relationships, but ALL of them. Thus, one toxic team member is all it takes to destroy a high performing team.”²

You can preemptively keep everyone focused on what you want to accomplish at work and how certain behaviors impede collective goals. This doesn't mean our coworkers shouldn't discuss challenges they might be facing in their personal and professional lives; I would want to know if a crew member is struggling so I could offer support. This is what we do for each other in the fire service. But if someone's issues keep us from achieving primary objectives, we owe it to each other and our customers to act. The fire department is the best gig in the world. Let's keep it that way. Be nice!

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References

- 1) Barsade, S. "How To Manage Toxic People At Work." The Hedges Company. Available at: <https://www.thehedgescompany.com/manage-toxic-people-work/>
- 2) Curnow-Chavez, A. 2018. "4 Ways To Deal With A Toxic Coworker." Harvard Business Review. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2018/04/4-ways-to-deal-with-a-toxic-coworker>



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What can we do when someone's habitual complaining is affecting functional teamwork?

1. *Don't tolerate it.* Refuse to accept anything that disrupts crew effectiveness. We should all come to work with three goals: 1) provide the best service we can; 2) ensure everyone goes home at the end of the shift; and 3) have fun doing the first two. If a co-worker prevents us from achieving these goals, it warrants a discussion or action. If you are a supervisor, it is your job to keep the crew functioning. If you're the one getting in the way, expect another crew member or chief officer to address your unacceptable behavior. (We discussed how to approach these conversations in a previous issue. [Click here to read it.](#)) If the situation remains uncurbed, things will stay the same—or they will get worse.
2. *Offer solutions and support.* If the issue impacts the complainer personally, say to them, "It sounds as if this is affecting you personally," or "It sounds as if you have a lot going on in your life." Then, encourage them to seek help. "I hope you're talking to someone." Suggest resources, such as a department peer team or a culturally competent mental-health professional outside your organization.
3. *Challenge the complainer to find solutions.* Put the ball back in their court by saying, "This seems to have really impacted your life. How do you intend to deal with it?" Or, "What can you do to fix this issue?"
4. *Model the behavior you would like to see in others.* When you catch yourself venting, say, "I'm having a rough time with this, but here is what I'm doing about it..."
5. *Consider talking to your supervisor or the human resources department if the problem continues.* Many employee assistance programs offer strategies on their websites for dealing with a difficult person.
6. *Take care of yourself.* Your physical and emotional health take priority. Stay physically active, eat healthfully and make time for fun activities outside of work. Talk about things that affect you with people you trust. Surround yourself with people you enjoy.