

THE ATTITUDE VIRUS: Curing Negativity in the Workplace

21 minutes, color

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CONTENTS

BACKGROUND	1
OBJECTIVES	5
WORKSHEET I	6
WORKSHEET II	7
WORKSHEET III.11
WORKSHEET IV.13
WORKSHEET V16
WORKSHEET VI.18

BACKGROUND

*All seems infected that th'infected spy,
As all looks yellow to the jaundiced eye.*

- Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

*It is at least as difficult to stay a moral
infection as a physical one.*

- Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

From the quotations above, we can see that the Attitude Virus is not just a modern affliction, but one that has been a concern for centuries. It can affect the weak or the powerful, the home or workplace, the worker or employer. Worst of all, if not discovered and eliminated quickly, the virus can spread to epidemic proportions, leading to loss of confidence, enthusiasm, creativity, and productivity.

In an organization or team there can be various carriers of the virus. It could be a manager who's overly critical or who lets out pressure by taking it out on employees. It could be a team member who feels her opinions aren't being heard, or who feels like she's doing more than her share. There might be people whose negative outlooks have nothing to do with work. Problems at home or ill health can sometimes lead to unhappy feelings on the job, which can easily spread to colleagues.

A healthy attitude is imperative for a well-functioning team or organization to achieve its goals. A positive environment can:

- Increase productivity and long-term growth
- Improve group performance and morale
- Improve customer satisfaction
- Reduce grievances, accidents, absenteeism and turnover
- Eliminate waste and the need to redo work
- Open up communication
- Increase initiative, creativity, and participation in decision making and problem solving.

Obviously, it makes good sense to vaccinate a workplace against the Attitude Virus. The following steps could prevent negativity from taking over your organization.

BACKGROUND
(continued)**Recognize that there is an attitude problem.**

This isn't always so easy. It requires either honest self-evaluation or a possible confrontation with a co-worker or team member. Managers particularly need to take the initiative here, looking at their own behavior as well as others'. What attitude are you projecting? How do your team members react to your comments or assignments? Which members of your team seem to have trouble working with you or with each other?

Take responsibility for your own attitude, and help team members take responsibility for theirs.

When there's no responsibility, a person has no motivation to change. Everything is done to him, and he only "reacts" to situations beyond his control.

Before any positive changes can be made, it's important for the person-with-an-attitude to recognize the difficulties his negativity is causing. If you're lucky, he'll take responsibility for his own behavior, perhaps becoming aware of the problem through a process of formal or informal self-evaluation on the job.

Often, it's up to a manager or co-worker to point out a team member's attitude problem. Although this can be a delicate task, it shouldn't be avoided.

- Discuss the problem in private.
- Begin by giving positive feedback.
- Handle emotionally charged subjects with sensitivity.
- Focus on performance, not personality.

When a person accepts responsibility, he is "responding" rather than "reacting" to a situation. A response requires a thoughtful acknowledgment. A reaction is an instinctive, often unproductive, way of dealing with difficulties. Negative people often react by blaming others for problems, refusing to take responsibility for any situation.

A team member can react to a shorter deadline by complaining about management, or he can respond by working out new strategies and schedules with his teammates. The complainer is merely being a victim, feeling like he's at the mercy of others. In the latter case, however, the team member is taking control of the situation, making a choice to act in a productive way.

Focus on behavior, not personality.

Since you're not a psychologist, you don't have the time or training to change a grouchy personality. You can, however, show how the team member's behavior affects the whole team's morale, productivity and goals. Once the person realizes the negative impact he has, he should begin to understand his responsibility for it.

Acknowledge any underlying causes for a negative attitude, and clarify issues that might lead to conflict between personal goals and team goals.

Once responsibility for a poor attitude is acknowledged, it's possible to look at some of the reasons behind it. Sometimes it can be stress from outside the workplace that's beginning to take its toll. Family problems, debts or illness can often lead to unresolved anger that is submerged, but not fully put aside on the job.

Sometimes the underlying cause is work-related. In this case, it might be necessary for the manager to help the team member clarify her needs and how they coincide with the team's goals. Again, the person might not even realize that anger and resentment about work are bubbling to the surface in ways that affect her performance. It's possible she's afraid to bring up uncomfortable issues related to her job or co-workers, such as being undervalued or overworked.

Address the situations that cause stress.

You can't be expected to provide counseling to colleagues with serious problems like substance abuse or personal trauma. In cases like that, it's best to refer the person to professional counselors. You can, however, provide a supportive, non-threatening environment and a sympathetic ear so that an unhappy team member feels free to express himself. Once the underlying causes of his anger are understood, it might be possible to work together towards a solution that will prevent future attacks of negativity and make him a more productive member of the team.

BACKGROUND
(continued)

Replace negative, ineffective reactions with new, more adaptable responses, then practice using the new responses.

In order to attack negativity, it's important to keep the recovering grumbler focused on his priorities. That may require restructuring some of his goals or working out new strategies with the rest of the team or staff.

Sometimes it's actually necessary to do some role-playing in order for a person to understand the consequences of his negative attitude and the alternative approaches he could use. Although it may seem artificial, rehearsing positive responses with a non-judgmental coach can be a useful way to modify unproductive behavior.

Monitor the team member's progress and follow through to ensure lasting improvement.

Once a team member begins using a new positive approach, he or she should be encouraged for efforts and get regular progress reports. Both manager and co-workers should give positive reinforcement, even when there are slip-ups. To prevent a relapse, lines of communication must stay open and be fortified by continuous support from colleagues.

Infect team members with a good attitude.

Look at your own behavior. Are you providing a good example of how you expect your fellow team members to act? Positive attitudes can spread as rapidly as negative ones. By being a model of good behavior, you're also acting as a vaccine against the Attitude Virus.

Negative attitudes can disrupt entire organizations, causing critical drops in morale and productivity. Reassigning or terminating troublesome employees is an expensive solution that could lead to additional complications. The most effective treatment of the Attitude Virus is isolating it and taking preventative action before it spreads. And, of course, there's nothing like a little compassion and care from others to help an afflicted colleague make a full recovery.



OBJECTIVES

After viewing the video **THE ATTITUDE VIRUS: Curing Negativity in the Workplace** and completing the exercises in the Training Designs, participants will:

- Understand the consequences of a negative attitude in the workplace and the benefits of promoting a positive, healthy environment.
- Understand how a poor attitude can quickly spread through the workplace.
- Be aware of the different types of negative attitudes.
- Know how to diagnose an attitude problem in themselves or their colleagues.
- Recognize the need to take responsibility for a negative attitude and its consequences.
- Be sensitive to underlying causes leading to negative attitudes and respond to them in a productive way.
- Be able to help team members clarify their feelings and relate them to team goals.
- Learn how to replace old, ineffective reactions with adaptable, productive responses.
- Know how to follow through in order to reinforce new, positive behavior.



WORKSHEET I

DISINFECTING THE WORKPLACE

When it comes to preventing an Attitude Virus, what do you think the role of a team leader, manager or supervisor is? Rank these in order of importance. (Those that you weight equally can have the same rank number.)

- ___ Be supportive and offer counseling to team members with a negativity problem.
- ___ Keep up standards by critiquing workers' performance, if necessary.
- ___ Be a role model by projecting a positive, productive attitude.
- ___ Be the authority figure, a leader who makes sure everyone on the team sticks to their delegated jobs.
- ___ Keep up team morale by acting as arbitrator between the team and upper management or clients, and by keeping the team informed of all decisions.
- ___ Keep team members focused on goals.
- ___ Step in when a team member's behavior affects others on the team.
- ___ Other:

WORKSHEET II**ATTITUDE ROLE PLAY**

Select three participants to act out the following scene. (You should read the italicized stage directions, and can take a role, if necessary).

Read the scenario, stopping when you come to each break point. Have participants fill out the relevant questions for each section.

Read the scenario again, this time without stopping. Then review each section, discussing participants' opinions from the answers they wrote down.

“ATTACK OF THE ATTITUDE VIRUS”

Bob, the team leader is speaking on the phone.

BOB: What! He's on probation again?! What is it this time? Low grades? Smoking in the boy's room?... Yeah, I'll stop by to see his coach, but I'm not sure if I can make it today.... Okay, I'll try to leave early, but things are pretty hectic.... Alright, alright, I'll be there.

Bob hangs up and Sylvia, a team member enters.

SYLVIA: You wanted to see me, Bob?

BOB: (irritated) Yeah, I'm getting the squeeze from above. There have been a lot of errors in our weekly reports. I can't be responsible for looking over every little thing around here. Is there some reason I can't count on you for a simple thing like re-checking your figures?

BREAK POINT 1

SYLVIA: (flustered) I usually do re-check them but I've been very busy the past couple of weeks. There's that new Samtech project that John and I have been working on—

BOB: That doesn't mean you suddenly give up your responsibilities.

WORKSHEET II (continued)

SYLVIA: No, but I thought we'd agreed to let Chris take more responsibility, so I've been having him read through all outgoing documents. When I've checked his work it always seemed alright.

BOB: I don't recall okaying that with you. From now on, I'd like you to personally check the weekly report.

SYLVIA: (shrugs unhappily) Okay.

BREAK POINT 2

Sylvia leaves Bob's office and goes to Chris' desk.

SYLVIA: Chris, you take care of the mailing, I'll finish going over this report.

CHRIS: Well, I'll have time to do it. The mailing won't take long.

SYLVIA: That's not your job anymore. There have been complaints about your work.

CHRIS: (surprised) What's the problem? I thought you said I was doing a good job.

SYLVIA: There have been errors that I'm getting blamed for, and I've got more important things to worry about.

CHRIS: I'm sorry. If you show me what I did wrong, I'll make sure it doesn't happen again. I really liked doing the reports.

SYLVIA: (tense) I really don't have time. Why don't you stick to your usual work for now. Maybe when things calm down we'll try again.

BREAK POINT 3

ATTITUDE ROLE PLAY DISCUSSION**BREAK POINT 1:**

What are some of the reasons Bob is in a negative mood?

How do you think Sylvia will react to his words?

What are Bob's goals or priorities?

BREAK POINT 2:

How might Bob have avoided passing on the Attitude Virus at this point?

Was Sylvia's reaction appropriate? How could she have responded to prevent the virus from spreading to her?

WORKSHEET II (continued)

What are Sylvia's goals or priorities?

What do you think Sylvia will say when she sees Chris?

BREAK POINT 3:

What are Chris' goals?

How might Sylvia have handled the difficulties with Chris?

In what ways could this be resolved to meet everyone's goals?

Who do you think the next victims of this Attitude Virus might be?

WORKSHEET III**ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE**

The way you say things is often the difference between being an Attitude Virus carrier and a productive team member. Turn the following negative statements into positive, productive statements.

Example:

Negative statement: *This report is much shorter than I expected. You had a whole week to work on it!*

Positive version: *This looks like a very concise report. It must have taken a lot of time to boil down all the information. Do you feel confident that everything's included?*

- ① The client's making another unreasonable demand. They want delivery by next week!

Positive Version:

- ② How come I always get all the lousy assignments, and you give the interesting ones to everyone else?

Positive Version:

- ③ Can't you see I'm too busy to do that right now?

Positive Version:

WORKSHEET III (continued)

4 I can't believe management wants us to start using these new forms! They're way too complicated.

Positive Version:

5 No one ever tells me anything!

Positive Version:

6 That new person we hired is completely incompetent. I wouldn't trust him with anything.

Positive Version:

7 I asked you to do that an hour ago! What's taking you so long?

Positive Version:

8 These phones are ringing off the hook, but nobody can be bothered to help me.

Positive Version:

WORKSHEET IV**INTERVENTION**

How would you inoculate your workplace against the bad attitudes in these three scenarios? Using the steps from the video, **THE ATTITUDE VIRUS: Curing Negativity in the Workplace**, develop some productive intervention strategies for each scenario:

- 1 Lisa has been coming in late, taking long lunches, and leaving early. Her work frequently contains mistakes, and she's often out of synch with everyone else. This behavior is causing problems for other team members, contributing to an unproductive work environment. You call Lisa into your office, explain the problem, and gently ask why her work has fallen off so much. She tells you that her child has a chronic illness, so she's always running home, and she often gets little sleep at night.

Does Lisa have an attitude problem and, if so, what is it?

Which strategies have you used to get this far?

How would you handle the problem from this point? Which steps still need to be addressed?

WORKSHEET IV (continued)

- ② You're a team leader who's just been overlooked for a promotion. Suddenly, your team members are treating you differently. They're less willing to come to you for help; they stop talking when you pass by. Team morale is down and the work is less thorough than usual. At first you think they're just avoiding you because of the delicate matter of the promotion. Then you realize that maybe the disappointment has affected your own behavior and attitude towards your team members.

Does this person have an attitude problem and, if so, what is it?

Which strategies have you used to get this far?

How would you handle the problem from this point? Which steps still need to be addressed?

- ③ Kevin has worked 25 years for his organization. He's not always up on the latest technology, especially computers, and he often gets frustrated. His younger team members sometimes get tired of having to help him all the time, especially when it seems like Kevin isn't making much of an effort to learn anything new. His knowledge of the organization makes Kevin a valuable team member, but as his work becomes more dependant on computers, he starts concentrating more on low-priority, non-tech tasks.

Does Kevin have an attitude problem and, if so, what is it?

Which strategies have you used to get this far?

How would you handle the problem from this point? Which steps still need to be addressed?

WORKSHEET V

SELF EVALUATION

Where do you rate on the negativity scale? Score yourself on a scale of 1 to 5 for each question, and try to be honest with your answers.

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always

SCORE

- ① Do you come into your workplace feeling enthusiastic and confident? _____
 - ② Do you focus on your goals even when you're having a bad day? _____
 - ③ Do you look for positive solutions when things don't go your way at work? _____
 - ④ Do you set a good example for co-workers? _____
 - ⑤ Do you communicate well with your colleagues? _____
 - ⑥ Do co-workers feel they can come to you for help? _____
 - ⑦ Are you satisfied with the quality of work you do? _____
 - ⑧ Do you find healthy ways to relieve stress? _____
 - ⑨ Do you collaborate with others to meet the team's and your goals? _____
 - ⑩ Are you open to changes in your routine or environment? _____
- Total** _____

SCORING

If your total is under 25, you are probably a carrier of the Attitude Virus. Continue to evaluate your performance on the job. If you can't break the pattern of negativity, ask for outside help from a supervisor, friend or professional.

If your total is between 25 - 35, you're on the borderline, someone susceptible to the infection, particularly during stressful times. When feeling pressured, give yourself a negativity test. Ask yourself if your work is up to par, if you snap easily, or whether your co-workers are acting differently towards you. Those could all be signs of infection.

If your total is over 35, you've managed to avoid the Attitude Virus. You may not be completely immune, though. So think about how you interact with colleagues, especially during stressful times. If you see others spreading their bad attitudes, try to intervene either by talking to them or a supervisor.

WORKSHEET VI

REACTING vs. RESPONDING

Sometimes it's up to you to immunize yourself against the Attitude Virus. When you're up against someone who's very negative, that can be difficult. Here's a chance to come up with healthy, productive responses rather than defensive, angry reactions. Sometimes the correct response can stop the virus in its tracks.

Example:

Sarah: The comments you made at the meeting today were totally inappropriate. I'm sure I'll be hearing from the client.

Carlos: But it's just what everybody's been thinking anyway.

What would be a better response?

Carlos: I'm sorry if it sounded that way. I should have spoken to you first about Karen's and my misgivings about the project. I'd like to explain why I made those comments. Do you have time to talk with Karen and me today?

❶ **Talia:** My work is piling up here, and you're taking forever on the copy machine!

Marie: Well, I had to wait for it too! What makes you more special than the rest?

What would be a better response?

Marie:

② Jeff: I am so sick of all this paperwork management lays on us. I'm just gonna start turning mine in late as a protest.

Sheila: Yeah, maybe if we all fall behind they'll realize what a stupid policy it is.

What would be a better response?

Sheila:

③ Carlton: Did you hear that they're planning to lay off twenty percent of the department?

Richard: No. But if they do, I know who I'd lay off.

What would be a better response?

Richard:

④ Felicia: You know I don't know how to do this. Why did you give it to me?

Mario: Because it's supposed to be part of your job, if you could ever be bothered to learn how to do it!

What would be a better response?

Mario:

⑤ Harry: This is the worst proposal I've ever read! Do you really think I can turn this in?

Curtis: Well, I told Teresa I'd need some help, but she was never around.

What would be a better response?

Curtis:

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