



Learning How to Be Less Negative Will Make You More Effective

By David Dye

When your team or supervisor thinks of you as a negative person, you're less likely to be invited to conversations where you would have valuable contributions to make. You're less likely to receive recognition for your work and your odds of promotion go down. If you often hear that you're too negative, learning how to be less negative is a critical skill to master—and fast.

That might not feel fair—after all, Eeyore was still invited to all the goings on in the Hundred Acre Woods and appreciated for his loyalty. But unless Winnie the Pooh and Tigger are on your team, shifting that perception of negativity will help you have more influence and contribute your expertise.

The good news is that there are easy shifts you can make that don't require you to change your personality – It's not about changing who you are. And these shifts will help you bring your best qualities to every team and conversation.

Why It's Hard to Hear

"Don't be so negative" can be incredibly frustrating feedback when you don't think of yourself as negative.

I know because I've heard this feedback many times in my career and relationships. What made it so frustrating is that in almost every one of those circumstances, I would not have told you I was being negative.

Most of the time, from my perspective, I was engaging with an idea, answering questions I thought I'd been asked, or trying to prevent problems.

But the reality, as Marshall Goldsmith says, is that "In leadership, it doesn't matter what we said. All that matters is what they think they heard."

Why They Think You're Negative

One of the most common reasons people get a 'negative' label is because of how they respond to ideas. See if this sounds familiar:

During a leadership meeting, your boss proposes an idea that has a shiny, attractive quality. Let's say they want to hire a contractor because it looks like it will save money, save time, and solve a problem.

You hear the idea and immediately see three critical problems:

1. The person they want to bring in to help doesn't have the experience with a critical function
2. While the initial cost is lower, managing the contractor and bringing them up to speed will cost more time and money, plus any extension of the contract would cost more money than the current situation

3. The function is mission-critical, and the contractor has no redundancy. If they get sick, the team's out of luck or will have to work harder to make up the difference.

What do you do?

Well, if you're often labeled as negative, you probably say something like, "I see a couple of challenges here..." and then list them.

Are you wrong?

You Might Be Right, But...

Let's assume you are one hundred percent correct in your analysis. And you care about the outcomes, the team's welfare, and saving the business time and money. You're justifiably concerned about the future of the team, the business, and your customers.

You care. You're correct. And yet, you're called negative. Why?

The problem is that for many personality types, jumping straight to problems and challenges isn't effective. For the "get things done" crowd, the roadblocks are frustrating—they want to see action. For the idea people, they want to explore and build on ideas, not have their creativity and energy crushed before their ideas can breathe. And for relationship people, jumping straight to problems feels harsh and disrespectful.

Roadblocks...crushed...harsh...disrespectful. What do all these words have in common?

They are negative.

And that's how your supervisor or colleagues perceive your attempt to head off problems.

And that's assuming you're always correct in your analysis. Which of course, you're not. There are often opportunities to build on ideas and explore possibilities you can miss.

How to Be Less Negative in Three Easy Shifts

The problem isn't your analysis. The team needs you to help think through ideas and ensure the solutions you implement together are as sound as they can be.

Here are three shifts you can make in how you respond to ideas that will help you have more influence:

1. First, Affirm

This step will help your idea people feel heard and relationship people feel connected. Find something interesting, fun, or positive about the idea and say that first. For example, you might say,

"That's a creative way of looking at this."

"A third party could bring a fresh perspective."

"Wow, that's interesting, I hadn't looked at it that way."

"I appreciate you thinking about how we can save money here."

(We once worked with a very literal-minded engineer who had a reputation as a caustic teammate. As he worked to "First, Affirm" his starting effort was, "Oh, that's an idea." It was as much of an affirmation as he could muster when confronted with what he saw as wrong-headed thinking—but his team still appreciated the effort.)

2. Present Problems as Solutions

This step is critical. You will still share your challenges or concerns. But instead of stating them as problems, package them as solutions or opportunities.

For example, "That's a great idea, here are three things we can do to make sure it succeeds. First, let's ensure the contractor has experience in this technology. Then, if we can find someone at this price point without an extension penalty and who has a team to back them up, this could really work."

Presenting your analysis as "ways to make this work" is magical. First, people's perception totally shifts. Your concerns don't come across as obstacles. You're contributing to the idea's success.

Second, when people hear what it will take to "make their idea work," they will form their own conclusions about viability or solutions. They may propose follow-up solutions. Or, you'll hear them say, "That's a good point, I don't think this is the best idea, let's keep looking." You didn't negate their idea, you supported it in a way that they could do the analysis.

3. Take Your Temperature

This final shift is about managing yourself.

When I am tired, frustrated, or have lots of problems vying for attention and someone presents an idea, I am most likely to forget steps 1 and 2. Or, I may do them, but my tone is tired, whiny, or negative.

When you find yourself in a conversation about ideas or where you would typically be told you are negative, pause and “take your temperature.” How do you feel? If you’re tired, frustrated, or tied in knots with other problems, can you pause and not respond right away?

For example, “I appreciate you bringing this up—and, I am exhausted and trying to solve three things at once right now. I want to make sure I give your idea the positive attention it warrants. Can we talk tomorrow morning?”

Most people will appreciate that you cared enough to be honest and valued their suggestion enough to give it a proper hearing. Sometimes, they’ll even say, “Oh, it’s okay, I was just brainstorming and it can wait.”

Taking responsibility for your state of mind and tone when you respond will help avoid the times you’re most likely to come across as negative.

You’re not changing who you are – you’re choosing to be your most effective self with others.

A Final Note About Mental Health

These suggestions about how to be less negative are written to help if you are otherwise feeling healthy and constructive. They are not intended to address depression or other mental health challenges.

If you find yourself in a state of negative thinking where everything seems dark, gloomy, or hopeless for many weeks, I invite you to be kind to yourself and talk with a counselor or mental health professional (just as you would talk to your dentist for a persistent toothache).

Strategic Leadership

Your Turn

When you care about success and want the best for your team, but that passion comes across as negative, these three shifts can help. They've helped me and many leaders we work with to have more influence and build better ideas with teammates.

I'd love to hear from you. If you (or someone you know) has wrestled with a reputation for negativity, what solutions did they find as they learned how to be less negative?

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