

DEALING WITH 'NEGATIVE PEOPLE'

I frequently get asked by workshop participants for suggestions for dealing with 'negative people' – this usually means people whose behaviour is often pessimistic, unconstructive and gloomy.

They are a number of reasons why someone may be 'negative'

- Their personality – our tendency to experience negative emotions tends to be stable over time. This tendency is about 50% genetically determined (you can take a free test to check yourself out on this and other personality traits at <http://personalitytest.net/ipip/ipipneo1.htm>)
- Unresolved grief - organisations are changing rapidly. Sometimes people aren't given the time and permission to mourn those changes – their grief then leaks out in anger and negativity.
- Burnout – cynicism and negativity are a feature of burnout. It may be that this job or organisation has contributed to their current attitude.
- If the negativity is just over one particular issue then it may be something about that issue that conflicts with their values, beliefs about the world or past experience. Be open to the idea that they may be right! Pessimistic people are often more accurate in their assessment of a situation than optimists. However optimists are more likely to create positive outcomes.

What can you do?

- Accept the truth of the old joke – *How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? One – but the light has to want to change!* It is almost impossible to change other people without their willing cooperation.
- Accept your emotional response to their behaviour – you may feel frustrated, angry or even start to feel negative too. Don't make it worse by telling yourself that you should feel differently or they should be different.
- Do consider viewing your emotion as a wave that will rise and fall and then be quickly followed by another emotion. Like a smart surfer, see that this particular wave will dump you. Let it pass and wait for a better wave to ride.
- Once the intensity of your emotion has passed, decide how you will respond. You may decide to:
 - Assertively communicate to the person how their behaviour affects you – remember to be specific and descriptive here (talk about a recent and specific event that you both experienced); be prepared to listen to their viewpoint and work with them to see if you can develop a meaningful solution.
 - Look for and acknowledge the grain of truth in what they have said (it will definitely be there) and build on that.
 - Look for exceptions – consciously notice times when the person says or does something constructive or is in a slightly more upbeat mood. Be a detective – what is going on at those times? Could you do something to make those circumstances happen more often?

- Be grateful that you have a 'black hat' thinker in your team. Teams with a devil's advocate have been shown to perform better than those where everyone is upbeat.

Rachel Collis
RJC Consulting (Australia) Pty Ltd
www.rjc-consulting.com.au

Rachel Collis is available for workshops, keynote speeches, team facilitation and individual coaching