

Keeping toxic positivity out of the workplace

In a perfect world, we'd have plenty of time to get everything done that we need to. We could take breaks and eat lunch without negatively impacting our productivity, and oh yeah, we'd be in a good mood too.

Unfortunately, this kind of superhuman performance isn't realistic. No matter what kind of work you do or how much you're getting paid, there's a limit to one's output. If you don't respect that limit, you'll end up with burnout and feel like you can't fathom another day of work.

Not all employers understand this. For toxic employers, it results in knowingly pushing teams beyond their capacity by looking on the bright side or talking down to them. For other employers, the push originates from naïveté. When an employee expresses a problem with their job, these "positive" employers will simply remind them of their amazing willpower and its value to the company, confidently reinforcing their ability to perform while invalidating the problem at hand. This is toxic positivity, and it's dangerous to your workforce.

How toxic positivity hurts employees

On a daily basis, we are surrounded by all kinds of positive messages telling us how great the world can be. This extends from the screens in our pockets to the encouragement we receive from our friends telling us to cheer up. Optimism, generally, is more valued than anything else, while pessimism is seen as a negative trait. People who express belief in an idea are seen as having positive emotions, while people less eager to hop aboard are colored as prickly curmudgeons who relish unhappiness. There is pressure to stay positive, even if it means buying into something you shouldn't.

Examples abound where the charisma of dishonest leaders results in toxic loyalty from employees — WeWork, Fyre Festival, and Theranos just to name a recent few. In these companies, people who express doubts and highlighted real problems are cast aside as naysayers whose attitudes are dangerous to the workplace. Some of them are fired—even sued!—while the rest of the team follow their leaders off a cliff of terrible decisions.

So how does toxic positivity hurt employees? By making them feel like their real, valid criticisms are nothing but a product of their bad attitude.

Positive vibes only vs. positive thinking

At its core, toxic positivity is a delusion. Rather than seeing the storms ahead, buckling down, and bracing for impact, these people stay the course believing that luck will change their situation. They would rather suffer permanent damage than sustain a blow to their mental state (or positive outlook).

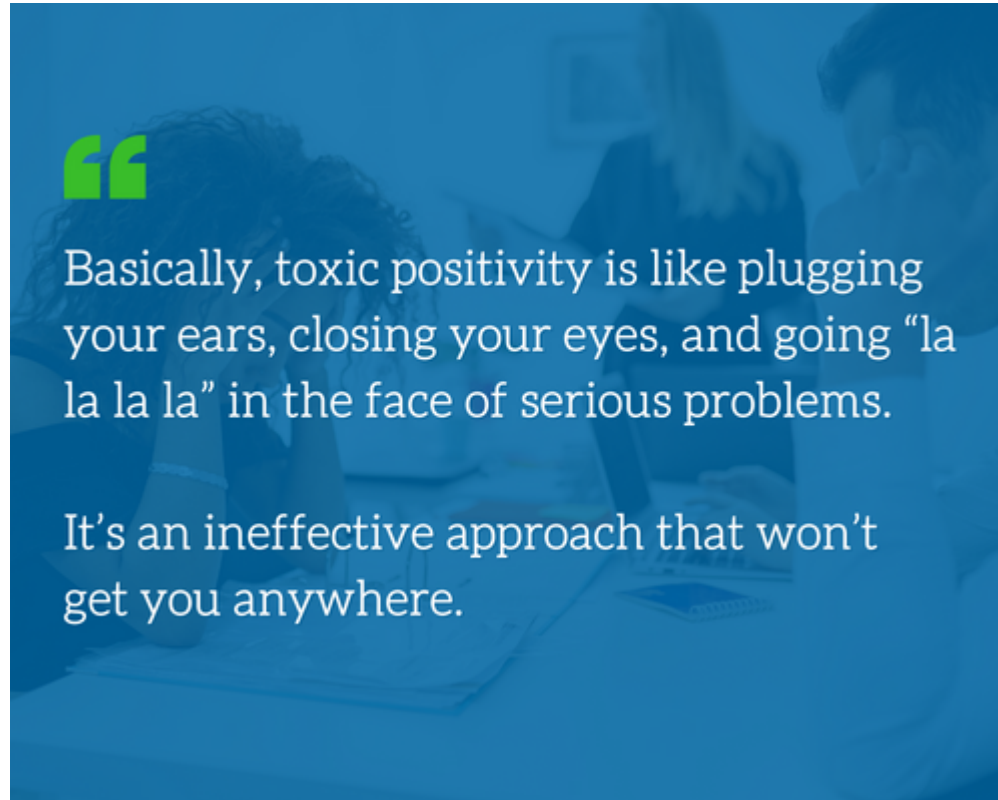
This is substantially different from a positive attitude. Rather than ignoring reality and expecting things to change, people with a positive attitude take things as they are and work toward a solution. While toxic positivity sees high turnover as the fault of the employees for not seeing or embracing the overall vision, someone with a positive attitude sees high turnover as an opportunity to make effective adjustments that make the company better in the long run.

Basically, toxic positivity is like plugging your ears, closing your eyes, and going "la la la la" in the face of

serious problems. It's an ineffective approach that won't get you anywhere.

Positive mindsets include negative emotions

One generational difference that emerged over the past decade is the importance younger people place on mental health. At last, feelings get the treatment they deserve! Before, we couldn't catch a break. People who suffered from mental illness were told that their negative feelings were just that—feelings. And since feelings are temporary, all they lacked was a positive attitude. Be positive, they would say, and your depression will go away.



Today, even though some still debate the validity of mental illness, more and more companies accept the fact that we don't all think the same way. Workplace culture has started changing accordingly. Mental health days, for example, are a staple of many companies' time-off policies. Employee Assistance Programs also appear more, giving people company-supported therapy to work through the emotional struggles of the human experience. Much training now also includes respect for mental illnesses, helping to eliminate the stigma some feel to express their negative thoughts.

These are all good things, but not all companies are happy about it. The reaction is toxic positivity which invalidates those feelings. Rather than looking inward to see how the company can grow and evolve, some leaders blame their employees for their lack of positive psychology, with some even suggesting that they quit and find another job.

When a work environment encourages people to hide their negative emotions from others, the result is not greater employee engagement. Instead, it creates animosity between those who feel frustrated and those who condemn them for it, creating a rift across which productivity and collaboration can be impossible. It's bad, so avoid the inclination toward good vibes.

Pizza parties aren't enough

If you've had enough jobs, odds are you've experienced the awkward pizza party. Usually, these happen just before or after something bad goes down, constituting a weak attempt to make up for poor treatment

elsewhere. They open with a short brief from leadership and are followed by weak applause from the rest of the team. It doesn't take much guesswork to realize that no one's as enthusiastic as they're expected to be.

Here's the thing: there's no substitute for good working conditions. Fair pay, reasonable expectations, and respectful staff are the bread and butter of a healthy work environment. If your employees lack these things and feel unhappy about their jobs, giving them a free lunch only serves to stoke the flames of discontent. Employees come to work for money, not pizza. Perks don't pay the mortgage/rent. If your teams are being short-changed for things they didn't ask for, gratitude probably won't happen. Bonuses are better.

Employers are responsible for providing a safe, productive work environment. They should spend their time and energy on what will provide a better livelihood for the people who execute their company strategies. And since you get what you pay for, cheap alternatives to employee compensation usually result in cheap performance.

Setting realistic expectations

It's an interesting time to be an employee. The gig economy has rendered most jobs remote, and for some reason, bosses think working from home means more time and energy to generate exponentially greater output. The result is a slew of tight deadlines that only the most religious workaholics could achieve. For the rest of us, it's simply impossible.

There are two ways to handle unreachable deadlines: fail to finish the work in time, or work after hours. As you probably guessed, toxic positivity prefers the latter.

People who work late are often glamorized as go-getters who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty, i.e. deprive themselves of sleep. They are the archetype of diligence and perseverance because nothing stands in their way when it comes to doing whatever they set their mind to. There are many terms for these kinds of employees—rock stars, unicorns, etc.—but they are not a model to follow.

Still, this doesn't stop certain employers from pitting team members against overachievers as a way to encourage competition. Of course, it's a terrible way to build team unity, but for some people, output is more important than psychological health. If your teams are constantly working overtime to meet their deadlines, what's needed is more staff, not motivation.

Criticism is a good thing

It's never pleasant to hear what's wrong with how you do things, but most of the time, those criticisms have merit. The pain we associate with criticism can help us move forward and become better at what we do, so long as we take the good and leave the bad. This goes back to the charismatic leader complex mentioned earlier—the more open you are to disagreements, the stronger you'll be as a leader. Conversely, the worse you treat dissent, the worse your employees will feel about you.

Abraham Lincoln was famous for appointing a cabinet full of squabbling members who not only disagreed with him, but disagreed with each other as well. However, this constant push and pull was encouraged rather than resisted, and it resulted in some of the most forward-thinking advances of the time.

If you find yourself with an employee who is willing to raise issues about how things are being done, thank them and find ways to implement their feedback. They have broken through the echo chamber at potentially great personal risk to let you know how to do better. This is a good thing.

Not all happiness is genuine

As Shakespeare says, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." It's important to remember that people adjust their behavior to the situations in which they find themselves. If they are in the

presence of a CEO or VP, they're less likely to air grievances than if they're among friends. They'll probably accept a bigger task or agree to a tighter deadline when asked by a boss than if asked by a co-worker who gives them the freedom to say no. This is normal. It's also important.

Toxic positivity can lead to a person feeling out of place if they don't have a smile to wear. They may avoid important conversations out of fear that their opinions could hurt their career, leading to a horde of yes-men who only reinforce what leadership believes. At worst, people may even suffer in silence because they don't want to make any ripples.

Echo chambers are bad for business. When people are afraid to be themselves because company culture says not to, their psychological safety is jeopardized. If an employer disregards the real, genuine feelings of the employees in favor of a more pleasant atmosphere, productivity suffers. Why? Because a person's emotional experience plays a role in how much work they do, and if they have to wear a constant smile to keep their job, they probably won't relax enough to produce the same caliber of work as they would if allowed to act normally.

So, how do you avoid toxic positivity?

Creating a healthy workplace isn't easy. Even the best companies have a hard time separating productivity from personality, let alone making room for a healthy work-life balance. But if you want employees to do their best work, the best approach requires allowing as much freedom as possible. Let people share their unfettered opinions. Check your own defensiveness in the face of their criticism. Listen.

Toxic positivity is a coping mechanism born from a desire to escape discomfort. Don't substitute positivity for real growth. Better to move in the right direction than to hold fast to principles that don't serve you. Give your employees a voice, and they will tell you how to be a better employer. You can do it!