



ATTITUDE: The 8--Letter Word that Spells Either Boom or Doom for Your Business

I'd challenge you to find a kid over the age of 8 who hasn't been lectured to death about the importance of a positive attitude. They get it from their parents, from their teachers, from their coaches and, yes, from their employers.

Why then do managers struggle relentlessly to keep their front lines staffed with friendly, cheerful, enthusiastic young people?

I'll offer three explanations:

First, it's just not cool to be positive. From James Dean to Fonzie and from Pink to Puck, the hippest icons for youth generally sport a giant chip on their shoulders and are always looking for a fight. Hundreds if not thousands of examples of bad attitudes invade the consciousness of today's youth, and the worst offenders usually get the most attention and the biggest contracts. Smiling, happy teens are viewed by their peers as goofy, spoiled, naïve kiss---ups. But if you're dismissive, have an edge, or create havoc everywhere you go, you're in good company. Trendy teen fashion stores such as Hollister, Aéropostale, Guess, and Abercrombie & Fitch employ—almost exclusively—the young, elite, pouty---faced cool kids in their communities who stare off into space as if they have something more important to do than help moms buy overpriced jeans for their kids.

A second explanation is that they see work as a bad thing. You're supposed to hate work; everybody does. Why should they be happy at work when work is the very thing the authority figures around them (parents, teachers, bosses, et al) constantly complain about? How many times can they hear things, like "Work sucks." "Thank God it's Friday!" "I'm calling in sick." "As soon as I can find something better, I'm outta there!" without it completely eroding their view of work?

The third reason young employees aren't as happy as they used to be is that they can't go anywhere these days without experiencing—up close and personal—stories about death, destruction, terrorism, chaos, and, what appears to be all out anarchy. This media---filled world won't allow them to escape the ranting political activists, the news of terrorism and natural disasters around the world, reports of crime, disease, scandals, and poverty. The world had its share of these kinds of problems when we were young too, but we weren't continually inundated with hi def surround sound reminders of all of them every waking moment of our lives.

With all they are exposed to, it's an uphill battle for any kid to stay positive.

As parents, educators, and workforce leaders, our challenge is to inoculate ourselves from taking on their negativity and, instead, help them embrace a positive attitude. This is not done by telling them the joke of the day or forcing a smile in their direction, but rather by taking sustainable measures to breed positivity into your interactions. Here are four steps you can take to impact the attitudes along your front lines:

- **Remove the Negative.** Enter your workplace through the backdoor and see your operation from your employees' perspectives. There's a big difference between a sign on the employee entrance that says, "All Employees Must Park in the Back Lot" and one that says, "Our Customers Pay Our Wages, So Let's Save the Closest Parking for Them." Carefully edit the negative language and overtones out of employee emails, notices, and other forms of communication that could be stated in a more positive way. Take steps to remove the drab and dreary signs, colors, and broken items that have a way of infesting themselves in the back areas allowed by managers because "employees are the only ones exposed to it." You can't isolate them from all the negativity that surrounds them, but you can take steps to remove some of the nastiness from your workplace.
- **Provide blind 360° feedback that comes from their coworkers.** Conceal individual identities, but remove the "me vs. you" stigma from an attitude assessment by allowing them to see themselves through varying perspectives. (Young people love this; that's why their Facebook wall is so important to them.) If their peers tell them to ditch their bad attitudes, you may see instant improvements.
- **Be on the lookout** for those glimpses of the attitude you're trying to instill in your people, and be prepared to call attention to it. "Thanks for being so willing to pull a double, Jake. Your positive attitude is an example for the others, and I'll make sure the folks at corporate hear about this." Don't get so caught up in dealing with all the bad attitudes that you overlook the good things that happen as a result of positive ones. Remember, what draws the most attention is what gets repeated.

You Lead the Attitude in Your Culture

A positive attitude at work is infectious, so the more you call it out to others and encourage it in key employees, the easier it will be for you to radiate it throughout your culture. This starts with the small things you do, like calling out the guy who went overboard for a customer or the receptionist who braves the blizzard to open on time, but it continues with how you highlight those kinds of things each day.

Positive shifts in your culture occur only if you model the attitude you want them to have, and after you begin sharing good things that are happening throughout your business with your young people. When you can't share positive news about your company, shine the light on something good that's taking place in your community, the nation, or the world. Make it your mission to be a purveyor of good tidings. Schedule pre-shift



huddles solely to share success stories of individuals, of the team, and of the company. Even though talk is cheap, what they hear from you can be prove invaluable.

As they say, "attitude is contagious," so let them catch the right virus from you and see coming to work as the brightest part of their day. It will be directly reflected in how they interact with your customers, which will give you even more to rave about.

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