



# How to Address **Negativity** in a **Positive** Way

## **Nine Principles to Guide Your Constructive Conversation**

**Y**ou know that frustrating feeling when someone on your team always seems to point out why ideas won't work. Their "wet blanket" way of stating their opinion sucks the life out of meetings and dampens everyone's enthusiasm.

As a smart leader, you know you need to stop this, but you also know you don't want to communicate to the person that their opinion doesn't matter or that dissent is unwelcome. You still need to get this message across:

- Your behaviour is negatively affecting me, the team, the business, and your value as an employee.
- I want you to speak up when you have a different point of view. I value perspectives that can see the potential downside of ideas. That is a skill of yours I don't want to lose.
- I need you to learn how to say your point of view in a more inviting way.
- I need you to be more open-minded to others' points of view. There's a difference

between seeing potential landmines and being convinced that your perspective is the only valid one. The first attitude is really useful; the second is not.

So how do you accomplish this? These nine principles can guide your conversation.

### **1 Name the game**

The term "game" often refers to some type of manipulation or hidden agenda you need to address. In this case, it simply means the behaviour pattern you want to discuss. Describe the behaviour you're talking about in concrete terms, so the person knows explicitly what you're referencing. Use a specific recent example as a launching point, and state that this is part of an ongoing pattern.

### **2 Assume positive intent**

We often experience people as negative when they are actually trying to be helpful, wanting to prevent others from making what they see as a serious mistake. Unfortunately they express their concern and perspective in unpleasant off-putting ways. If we simply criticize their approach and don't acknowledge their positive intent, they may feel their concerns and opinions are unwelcome, a message that tells them to care a little — or a lot — less

about contributing in the future. Therefore, it's important to acknowledge the value their perspective and involvement can bring, but only if they communicate it effectively.

### **3 Explain what you are not saying or intending**

This excellent bit of advice from the authors of *Crucial Confrontations* helps you prevent possible misunderstandings and, by doing so, prevent the other person from becoming defensive.

### **4 Ask about their positive intent**

As well as acknowledging the benefit of someone who can see potential flaws in an idea, ask them to share their actual intent. People often aren't aware of their true intent and will come up with explanations that make sense to them but aren't necessarily true, a phenomenon called the "interpreter function". (Check out the fascinating research of Michael Gazzaniga, director of the SAGE Center for the Study of Mind.) Even if the person's explanation isn't reality based, simply talking about it helps put it out on the table and allows you to discuss more productive ways of achieving their stated intent.



## 5 Connect cause and effect

Often people who say things that annoy or repel others have no clue about the effect they're having and the price they pay for it. You want to clearly, but with compassion, describe what you see as the effect of their behaviour, as it concerns both you (e.g., team performance) and them (e.g., how willing others are to listen to them and take them seriously).

## 6 Ask if they understand

Often when I coach managers on how to proceed after they bring up the issue, many want to jump right into asking the other person, "Okay, so what should we do about this?" If the other person doesn't understand what you're talking about, it's pretty hard to have a productive conversation about possible solutions and an action plan.

## 7 Ask for their perspective

A person might understand what you're saying but see it very differently. If they disagree with your perception or assessment, how invested will they be in problem solving? Think of the times someone defined a situation in a way that you disagreed with and didn't ask for or listen to your perspective.

They just ploughed forward with a game plan. Think of how angry, resentful, and misunderstood you felt. So make sure you ask for their perspective.

## 8 Involve them in generating alternative approaches

The more someone is involved in generating solutions and an action plan, the more investment they feel.

## 9 Thank them for talking about this issue

Let them know you appreciate their willingness to talk about this. If they were strikingly non-defensive and open, acknowledge how much you appreciate that. Many people find talking about interpersonal issues uncomfortable, so when someone is willing to do that, it's nice to acknowledge their willingness to do so.

### DBR

David Lee is an internationally recognized authority on organizational and managerial practices that optimize employee performance, morale, and engagement. He is the author of *Managing Employee Stress and Safety* as well as about 100 articles and book chapters. You can download more of his articles at <http://www.humannatureatwork.com> or contact him at [David@HumanNatureAtWork.com](mailto:David@HumanNatureAtWork.com)

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**Australia: 613 9245 0245**  
[hrrsolutions@au.drakeintl.com](mailto:hrrsolutions@au.drakeintl.com)

**Canada: 416 216 1067**  
[solutions@na.drakeintl.com](mailto:solutions@na.drakeintl.com)

**Hong Kong: 852 2848 9288**  
[drake@drake.com.hk](mailto:drake@drake.com.hk)

**New Zealand: 0800 840 940**  
[solutions@nz.drakeintl.com](mailto:solutions@nz.drakeintl.com)

**Philippines: 632 7532490**  
[weoutperform@drakeintl.co.uk](mailto:weoutperform@drakeintl.co.uk)

**Singapore: 65 6225 5809**  
[drake@sg.drakeintl.com](mailto:drake@sg.drakeintl.com)

**South Africa: 011 883 6800**  
[solutions@drake.co.za](mailto:solutions@drake.co.za)

**United Kingdom: 0800 111 4558**  
[solutions@drakeintl.co.uk](mailto:solutions@drakeintl.co.uk)