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How to Overcome a Negative Work Environment.

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How to Overcome a Negative Work Environment.

Abstract
This literature review examined how to overcome negative work environments. The review considered twelve popular books, and summarized key advice that most people can practically apply to their current situation of a negative working environment. The three main themes for overcoming a negative work environment revealed throughout the literature reviewed were: 1) accept ownership over the situation; 2) work to make the best of the current situation; and 3) take specific action to change the situation. This topic could be further researched as a case study throughout organizations to determine additional causes of negative work environments, and to determine additional advice for individuals and organizations on how to overcome negative work environments.

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How to Overcome a Negative Work Environment

GHRD 590 Masters Thesis

Gretchen Bird Bennett

St. John Fisher College

April 15, 2008
SIGNATURE PAGE

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ABSTRACT

This literature review examined how to overcome negative work environments. The review considered twelve popular books, and summarized key advice that most people can practically apply to their current situation of a negative working environment.

The three main themes for overcoming a negative work environment revealed throughout the literature reviewed were: 1) accept ownership over the situation; 2) work to make the best of the current situation; and 3) take specific action to change the situation.

This topic could be further researched as a case study throughout organizations to determine additional causes of negative work environments, and to determine additional advice for individuals and organizations on how to overcome negative work environments.
Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

Overview of Problem

The American workforce is plagued with a certain population of employees who are determined to complain constantly about their work environment, blame their manager for their misery, and then proceed to do absolutely nothing about it. This, in turn, is resulting in significant lost potential of these otherwise qualified individuals. In the experience of this researcher, having served as the Human Resource Manager for a small, tightly run business, the employees spent an exorbitant amount of time blaming their manager for their own frustrations. Imagine if all of that time had been spent instead on figuring out a solution to make their personal situations better, and then directed that energy towards producing in the workplace.

This issue is relevant because, perhaps unfortunately, many of us will spend more than a third of our lives at work! In many cases, we spend more time with our coworkers than we do with our friends and family. Given the overwhelming amount of time we spend in the workplace, wouldn’t it make sense to do all that we can to make it the best, most positive experience possible? Why then, do so many of us simply complain about our workplace, instead of standing up and seeing what we might be able to do to make it a better environment? If we are miserable in our occupations, which are such a huge part of our lives, the ripple effect on our family life, and on society at large, can be terrifying.
Problem Statement

Given the prevalence and relevance of this issue, there has not been much research or summarization done on the subject of practical steps to help overcome a negative work environment. Therefore, there is a need for a study to pull together the major themes from the best selling popular “self-help” literature, and identify some techniques and ideas to assist organizations and individuals suffering from negative work environments.

Research Questions

1. What do twelve of the best selling “self-help” authors of the past twenty-five years offer to address the problem of overcoming negative work environments?

2. What can the average person take away from these books, in terms of practical advice, for their own situation?

Significance of Study

This study will benefit individuals looking for help to overcome their negative work environment, because the researcher has summarized key points of advice from the popular literature, providing busy individuals with a quick reference guide. The study will also benefit organizations looking for ways to increase morale in the workplace, because it summarizes many of the key issues contributing to negative work environments. And the study will benefit the field of Human Resource Development, as it contributes additional research to the field on developing workplace morale.
Methodology

This literature review summarizes twelve positive psychology books, each dealing with the impact individuals can have on their own workplace morale. These books were chosen due to their positive psychology themes, as well as the fact that each of the authors reviewed have been widely read, and are acclaimed in their field. Many of the authors reviewed have been #1 on the New York Times best-sellers list, and others are nationally recognized speakers or authorities in their fields.

It was intentional on the part of the researcher not to investigate strictly academic sources, due to the following two considerations. First, there has not been much academic research done specifically on ways to overcome negative work environments. Second, the researcher wanted to focus on finding practical applications, easily understandable by anyone currently experiencing a negative work environment.

Definition of Key Terms

1. “Workplace Negativity:”
   The result of a loss of confidence, control, or community (humanresources.about.com).
   Employees with negative emotions and behaviors, experiencing negative stress and dissatisfaction with their lives and jobs. Resulting in lowered productivity and increased unhappiness. (http://2waycommunications.net/curing.htm)

2. “Morale:”
   The state of the spirits of a person or group as exhibited by confidence, cheerfulness, discipline, and willingness to perform assigned tasks (www.answers.com).

3. “Positive Psychology:”
The scientific study of the strengths and virtues that enable individuals and communities to thrive (en.wikipedia.org).

4. "Popular Culture" or "Pop Culture:"

Deemed as what is popular within the social context - that which is most strongly represented by what is perceived to be popularly accepted among society. (en.wikipeida.org)
Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this paper is to explore the topic of how to end workplace negativity, and to propose suggestions of how to do so. The result of this review, a series of examples and solutions for what do in a negative environment where one feels they have no power to do anything about it, can serve as a resource to help frustrated employees and organizations everywhere. This overwhelmingly common problem of negative work environments is something that in many cases can be overcome.

Throughout this Literature Review, twelve books were reviewed. For each book title, a brief background of the author, a brief summary of the book, and five points of key advice offered by the author are presented.


American television personality, author and psychologist, Phillip McGraw is probably best known for his daytime television show “Dr. Phil”, where he offers psychological advice to individuals seeking relationship help. His first bestseller, Life Strategies was a #1 New York Times Bestseller, and became an international hit.

Summary

In Life Strategies, “Dr. Phil” provides some straight forward advice for pushing individuals to take charge of the problems in their lives. In his opening chapter, Dr. Phil emphasizes a foundational point of the book - that no one in this world will ever care about your problems or your situation as much as you. This is an important starting point for this thesis as well, because if you are experiencing a negative environment, you
should never expect that you can sit back and wait for someone else to change it. It will never happen.

He next poses the hard question “Is what I’m doing today really what I want to do, or am I doing it, not because I want to, but because it is what I was doing yesterday?” (p. 14). You cannot change what you do not acknowledge. “If what you’re doing is not working, change it” (p. 30). Stop making excuses for yourself or for others, and make the change that needs to be made.

Ownership over your situation is key to overcoming your negative work environment.

Key Advice

1. The problem you are currently faced with, no matter what it is, is yours to solve. No matter how much you complain about it, no one will ever care about it as much as you, and in reality you are the only person it affects.

2. You cannot change what you do not acknowledge.

3. Ask yourself: What am I doing, that is not working? And what can I do to change it?

4. Ask yourself: How can I own, rather than complain about, how others are treating me?

5. Be specific about what you want, and then work towards getting it!

2. What You Can Change & What You Can’t (Seligman, 1993)

American psychologist and best selling author, Martin E. Seligman, has written on many positive psychology topics including authentic happiness, and learned optimism
Seligman has served as president of the American Psychological Association, and is currently a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Summary

In his self-professed “complete guide to self-improvement” Seligman addresses a host of physical and physiological problems, and then proceeds to explain if each problem is one that can indeed be changed, or if it’s a problem about which you shouldn’t waste your time and energy. “With this knowledge, we can use our precious time to make the many rewarding changes that are possible” (p. 15). Everyday anxiety, for example, is something that one can certainly change.

Seligman points out that our culture is one that really believes we can change, we can improve, and we can advance. However, Seligman claims that up to half of one’s personality is genetically inherited. “The other half of personality comes from what you do and from what happens to you” (p. 45), and this is the half that you can change.

According to Seligman, people, in general, “are astonishingly attracted to the catastrophic interpretation of things” (p. 49). Much of successful living consists of learning to make the best of a bad situation. A fact one can change, according to Seligman is optimism. Optimism is a learned skill. Once learned, it increases achievement at work, and improves physical health (p. 5). Seligman discusses the health benefits of working to achieve fitness. “Achieving fitness is much more sensible than fighting fatness. Moderate exercise - burning off 2,000 calories per week - produces two extra years of life. Exercise also fights depression and increases self-esteem” (p. 192).

Key Advice
1. Ask yourself: *How can I make the best of my “bad” situation?*

2. Ask yourself: *What are the things I can change, and what are the things I can’t?*

3. Once you’ve narrowed down the things that you can change, you’ll know what to focus your energy on, and what to not to waste your time on.

4. Ask yourself: *Am I focusing on the “catastrophic interpretation” of the situation? What is the more optimistic approach to the current situation?*

5. Are you physically fit? Could you work to achieve additional fitness – which in turn might help other issues in your life as well?

3. *Learned Optimism* (Seligman, 1990)

**Summary**

There are two ways of looking at the world: optimistically or pessimistically. The pessimists “tend to believe bad events will last a long time, will undermine everything they do, and are their own fault” (p. 4). The optimists, on the other hand, when dealing with the same situation as the pessimist, tend to believe that “defeat is just a temporary setback, and that its causes are confined to this one case” (p. 4). They also believe that the defeat is not their fault. “Confronted by a bad situation, they perceive it as a challenge, and try harder” (p. 4). Seligman points out that habits of thinking can be changed, and optimism is something that can be learned. The crucial way to change your thinking from pessimistic to optimistic is not telling yourself positive statements when you do well, rather it is changing what you think when you fail. “Changing the destructive things you say to yourself when you experience the setbacks that life deals all of us is the central skill of optimism” (p. 15). Instead of responding to misfortune with
"It's me, it's going to last forever, it's going to undermine everything I do" (p. 44), consider resisting the misfortune, and realizing "It was just circumstances, it's going away quickly anyway, and besides, there's much more to life" (p. 44).

Seligman does caution, however, that pessimism is sometimes needed and warranted. For example, pessimists tend to be more realistic. We all have some sense of both pessimism and optimism, even the extreme Pessimists and extreme Optimists. Seligman suggests we can "learn to choose optimism for the most part, but also to heed pessimism when it is warranted" (p. 115). "Becoming an optimist consists not of learning to be more selfish and self-assertive, and to present yourself to others in overbearing ways, but simply of learning a set of skills about how to talk to yourself when you suffer a personal defeat" (p. 207). Learning optimism is about speaking to yourself about your setbacks from a more encouraging viewpoint.

When you encounter a difficult situation and start to become pessimistic, Seligman suggests that you must dispute your own negative beliefs about the situation. This is a serious argument with yourself, and by effectively disputing the negative beliefs, "you can change your customary reaction from dejection and giving up, to activity and good cheer" (p. 218).

"Common sense tells us that success makes people optimistic" (p. 255). Seligman's Learned Optimism, however, teaches the opposite: "Optimistic people become successes". Learned optimism can help you overcome problems in all aspects of life – in your relationships, in your own view of yourself, and in your work. Learned optimism is a powerful tool that can help you achieve the goals you have set for yourself, and help improve the overall quality of your life.
Key Advice

1. Becoming an optimist is learning a set of skills about how to talk to yourself when you suffer a personal defeat.

2. Ask yourself: How do I respond to myself in my negative environment?

3. Ask yourself: How can I dispute my negative beliefs about the situation in a realistic way?

4. Learn optimism, and it will help you achieve goals that you set for yourself.

5. Remember, optimistic people become successes!

4. Take Effective Control of Your Life (Glasser, 1984)

Dr. William Glasser is an internationally recognized psychiatrist, best known for his book Reality Therapy, a method of psychotherapy he developed in 1965 which is now practiced all over the world (www.wglasser.com).

Summary

What moves us to act is inside, not outside, of ourselves. Glasser gave the example of choosing not to stop for a red light for an emergency, or choosing not to answer a ringing phone. Those outside forces do not in themselves cause us to act. “Everything we do – good or bad, effective or ineffective, painful or pleasurable, crazy or sane, sick or well, drunk or sober – is to satisfy powerful forces within ourselves” (p. 2). It is our choice to be miserable in our workplace, just as it is a choice to answer a ringing phone. Glasser goes on to state that no matter what your circumstance, it never does any good to either accept your misery, or blame it on the world. Doing so deprives you of any opportunity to take control of your life!
Glasser’s control theory suggests that one spend energy to **attack** the problem, instead of blaming it. Instead of **choosing** to feel miserable about your job (and it is a choice), choose to do something about it.

**Key Advice**

1. No one is **making** you act the way that you do, other than yourself!
2. Before you react to a situation in your negative work environment, consider if you really want to **choose** to take that action.
3. Ask yourself: **How am I currently choosing to accept my negative environment?**
4. Ask yourself: **How can I attack my problem, instead of blaming it?**
5. It never does any good to either accept your misery, or blame it on the world. Instead, take control of your life!

5. **The Secret** (Byrne, 2006)

The Secret is a #1 New York Times best-seller, and has sold over 7.5 Million copies. Author Rhonda Byrne was born in Australia, and began her career as a radio producer. In May of 2007, Rhonda Byrne was recognized as one of the world’s most influential people in TIME Magazine’s “The TIME 100: The People Who Shape Our World”. Byrne currently lives outside of Los Angeles, California.

**Summary**

The secret behind The Secret is the law of attraction. The law responds to your thoughts, no matter what they are. When you think of something you don’t like, you
think even worse thoughts. "You become what you think about most, but you also attract what you think about most" (p. 8). The secret turns your thoughts into things in your life.

The Secret suggests that the only reason why so many people don’t have what they want is because they are focusing more on what they don’t want, than what they do. For example, thinking “I don’t want to be in this job forever” is really focusing on being in this job forever. Focusing on “I want to be the CEO of my own company”, on the other hand” is focusing on something you want.

The law of attraction does not consider good or bad, it “simply gives you whatever it is you are thinking about” (p. 13). According to The Secret, each person literally creates their own life through their thoughts, and the law of attraction.

According to researchers, people have about sixty thousand thoughts in a given day. What you are feeling is the quickest way to know what you are thinking. It is impossible to feel good and at the same time be having negative thoughts. If you are feeling good, it is because you are thinking good thoughts (p. 32).

According to the secret, the universe is like your Genie. “Your wish is my command”. “Your whole life and everything in it has been created by You” (p. 46). The Secret suggests three steps to getting what you want: ask, believe and receive. Ask for a new job, believe that you have it, and receive it when it comes.

One starting point is to make a list of everything for which you are grateful. For example, list what you like about your current job situation. There is great power in being thankful. Often realizing what you do have, will take your focus off of what you don’t.
Negative feelings will never bring you what you want. They will only return you to more of what you don’t want. “When the pictures have appeared of something you do not want, it is your cue to change your thinking and emit a new signal” (p. 144). Stop focusing on your boss that you don’t agree with, and start thinking of the new job you will have, or the things you currently have for which you are grateful.

Key Advice

1. You become what you think about most, but you also attract what you think about most. It is important to consider what you spending your time thinking about!

2. It is impossible to feel good and at the same time be having negative thoughts.

3. Ask yourself: *Am I focusing more on what I don’t want, than what I do want?*

4. Ask, believe, and receive!

5. Make a list of the things you are grateful for in your current environment.


Anthony “Tony” Robbins is an American self-help writer and motivational speaker, and is known for his best selling books - including *Unlimited Power* - his life coaching techniques, and his live motivational events.

Summary

In Unlimited Power, Robbins points out the exciting observation that power is something that is uniquely available to *everyone*, in a way that it never was in the past. Years ago it was land, or money, that provided power. Now it is knowledge (plus action on that knowledge) that gives power. “The greatest gift that extraordinarily successful people have over the average person is their ability to get themselves to take action” (7).
In a nutshell, Robbins’ 400+ page national bestseller on unlimited power is about two words: producing results. The way to producing those results is summed up best in Robbins’ Ultimate Success Formula, which essentially says: Know what you want, try something to get it, and if that doesn’t work, try something else.

Robbins cites countless examples of inspiring individuals who failed and failed and failed and then succeeded tremendously. Individuals like Thomas Edison who tried thousands of inventions of the light bulb before it actually worked, or Abraham Lincoln who failed at business, lost two congressional races, lost a senatorial race, failed in an effort to become vice-president, lost another senatorial race, and won the race for President. *Know what you want, try something to get it, and if that doesn’t work, try something else.*

Another key to success is trying to make “a successful marriage between what you do and what you love” (79). Do you know anyone who has achieved massive success by doing something that they hate? Think about what you love to do, and then see how you can move your work towards it. “If you can find creative ways to do your job, it will help you move toward work that’s even better” (p. 80).

Key Advice

1. Power (through knowledge and action) is something that is uniquely available to you now, in a way that it would not have been years ago.

2. The most successful people have found the simple ability to get themselves to take action.

3. Know what you want, try something to get it, and if that doesn’t work, try something else.
4. Fail, and fail, and fail, and fail, and fail, until you succeed tremendously!

5. Ask yourself: *How can I move my work towards doing something I love to do?*


Patrick Lencioni is founder and president of The Table Group, a management consulting firm specializing in executive team development and organizational health. *The Three Signs of a Miserable Job* is Lencioni’s most recent of six nationally recognized books, including the New York Times best-seller *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*.

Summary

The three signs of a miserable job, according to Lencioni, are immeasurability, irrelevance, and anonymity. If you don’t know how to measure if you’re doing well, if you don’t know how what you do makes a difference, and if you feel like no one cares about what you are doing – you are certainly bound to be miserable in your job.

First, “a job is bound to be miserable if it doesn’t involve measurement” (p. 128). Are you striving towards a goal in your job? Do you know when you have met that goal? If not, your work may seem like an endless drive to nowhere.

“The second cause of misery at work is irrelevance; the feeling that what you do has no impact on the lives of others” (p. 132). As obvious as this is, so many managers never take the time to help their employees understand that their jobs matter! If not directly to the customer, or the end product user, often an employee’s job considerably impacts their manager’s life, and if the manager could just be more encouraging, such as saying “When you help out, it makes my day a lot less stressful, and I really appreciate it”, the employee
might work a lot harder, realizing that his or her actions make a difference! Managers, in turn, need to realize that the people whose lives they impact are their employees.

The third sign of a miserable job is anonymity. Get to know who you work with. Care about them as people! "People who see themselves as invisible, generic, or anonymous cannot love their jobs, no matter what they are doing (p. 221). "I don’t care if you’re the Queen of England, or a rock star, if you can’t measure what you’re doing, if you don’t think it matters to anyone, and if you feel like no one is interested in who you are, you are going to be miserable at work" (p. 176).

"Management is an everyday thing. Strategy and financial reporting and planning are not" (p. 196). The best managers “are the ones who spend less time at the register and dealing with customers, and more time giving employees immediate feedback about what they’re doing right and wrong” (p. 197). Many managers are not doing that because they are being required to fill out reports all day, and are not being taught how to manage their people!

Key Advice

1. Ask yourself: *Am I able to measure if I’m doing well? Am I striving towards a goal?*

2. Ask yourself: *Are there additional ways I can create some additional measurability in my work?*

3. Do you understand how your position affects other people?

4. Do you feel like anyone cares about what you are doing?

5. Do you care about what others are doing? Particularly those that report to you, or work closely with you?
8. *The Empowered Manager* (Block, 1991)

Peter Block is an author, speaker, and a partner in Designed Learning, a training company that offers consulting skills workshops. He is the author of three best-selling books: *Flawless Consulting, The Empowered Manager*, and *Stewardship*.

**Summary**

Many people can attest to the major role that workplace politics can play in creating a negative work environment. The goal of Block’s *The Empowered Manager* “is to present a way of being political that balances the hope for transforming organizations with the risks in attempting change, in a realistic and helpful way” (5).

When employees are constantly looking to their manager to give direction, it creates a powerful sense of dependency. As long as the problems in the department are “the boss’s” problem, the employee does not have to take any responsibility for it. If, instead, employees took their own initiative to determine a solution to the problem (which is what many managers are actually looking for their employees to do anyway), a powerful sense of autonomy would be developed, and the employee would have been able to turn around a negative work environment for the better! “When we choose autonomy we realize that there is nothing to wait for” (17). The downside, of course, is that if our solution does not work, we will be the one to blame. The real downside, though, is when we never even attempt a solution, and stay in a negative environment for years constantly looking to our manager to “solve” our issues.

To feel empowered, according to Block, means several things. It means *taking responsibility for our current situation*. Instead of blaming others, any circumstance we find ourselves in, is ours to figure out. It means *we work for something that is more than*
just paying the bills. "It may take years to figure out what the purpose is, but to be empowered, we have to believe it is in there somewhere" (70). Finally, it means committing to achieving that purpose, now. Knowing what you want to do, and committing to do it despite who your boss is, or what your current obstacles are, are two different things. To be empowered, you will act now.

Key Advice

1. Ask yourself: Do I constantly look to my superiors for direction?

2. Ask yourself: Are most of the problems in the workplace my boss's problem?

3. Ask yourself: No matter how bad my circumstance, how can I take responsibility for the current situation?

4. Ask yourself: What is the real purpose of my work? This is an important question.

5. If you want to be empowered, you need to start acting now.

9. The Answer to How is Yes (Peter Block, 2002)

The Answer to How is Yes was written more than ten years after The Empowered Manager, and won the 2002 Independent Book Publisher Book Award for Business Breakthrough Book of the Year.

Summary

In The Answer to How is Yes, Block considers the philosophical question behind the common question of How? Block suggests that if we stopped asking "how" so often, it might force us to consider why we are doing what we are doing, and if it is even worth doing. When you find yourself in a hole, the first thing you should do is stop digging (p.
3). There is great power in asking the right question initially. Considering the right question initially can save time, and can make sure you are truly headed where you want to go. “Yes” questions, instead of “How” questions, “transform our inquiries into a deeper, more intimate discussion of why we do what we do” (p. 33). One example of a Yes question is “How will the world be different tomorrow as a result of what we do today?” “This kind of question brings our purpose into focus. It makes us choose what matters for ourselves” (p. 33).

Block suggests that we often try to seek certainty in situations (often by asking lots of “how” questions), because we are often filled with doubt, insecurity, and the belief that we are not enough. Accepting the fact that there just are not answers to every problem can change our whole perspective on life. Changing our “how” questions, for “yes” questions can help us get to the point, and can also help us move on to more important matters (p. 123). Focusing our energy on bigger picture “yes” questions can not only make our days more proactive, it can also ease some of the frustrations with constantly looking for the answers to all of the smaller “how” questions we are concerned we don’t know the answers to.

Key Advice

1. Ask yourself: How will the world be different tomorrow as a result of what I am doing today?

2. If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging!

3. The next time you are struggling with “how” to accomplish a task, first stop and consider why you are doing it.
4. Accepting the fact that there just are not answers to every problem can change your whole perspective on life.

5. Remembering to focus your energy on the big picture can make your day more productive.

10. *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989)

Dr. Stephen Covey established the "Covey Leadership Center" which later merged with Franklin Quest to form FranklinCovey, a global professional-services firm and specialty retailer selling both training and productivity-tools to individuals and organizations. FranklinCovey’s mission is to enable greatness in people and organizations everywhere. Covey’s *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* is a #1 National Bestseller, selling more than 20 Million copies (in 38 languages), and was named the #1 Most Influential Business Book of the Twentieth Century.

Summary

Covey’s Seven Habits are largely common sense practices, that if we would just take the time to focus on them, would make all the difference in our lives. Covey’s first habit is the habit of proactivity. The habit of proactivity means being proactive in our responses to things that happen, rather than reactive. The language of our response to things that happen in life can become self-fulfilling prophesy. If we constantly say “there’s nothing I can do”, then chances are, you will do nothing, and the situation might not change. If on the other hand we say “let’s look at the alternatives and see what we can do”, you might do something to change the situation.
The second habit is to begin with the end in mind. This means having a clear understanding of your destination, when you start. Keeping a mental picture of the ultimate goal at all times, will help keep you on target. Without a clear destination of where you are going, it is easy to get side-tracked, and off-course.

Third, put first things first. This has to do with effective prioritizing, and making sure that the things that you are actually doing throughout the day support the last habit, keeping your ultimate destination in mind.

Habit four is training yourself to always think win/win. “Win/Win is a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions” (p. 207). This is a habit that can transform anyone. “Whether you are the president of a company or the janitor, the moment you step from independence into interdependence in any capacity, you step into a leadership role” (p. 206). Win/Win is not the answer to every situation, but in the long run, it is the only real alternative to successful interdependent relationships.

Habit five is the “key to effective interpersonal communication” (p. 237). It is to seek first to understand, and then to be understood. In our culture, we tend to want to try to solve problems before we even know the full scope of the situation. Listen with the intent of understanding, rather than the intent to respond. In the end, this will save countless time and energy, just by taking a little extra time to listen. “Listening takes time, but it doesn’t take anywhere near as much time as it takes to back up and correct misunderstandings when you’re already miles down the road” (p. 253).

The sixth habit is synergy. Synergy has to do with working together, and simply means the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Covey suggests that when you see
two alternatives – yours and the “wrong” one – you can look for a synergistic third alternative. “There is almost always a third alternative, and if you work with a Win/Win philosophy and really seek to understand, you usually can find a solution that will be better for everyone concerned” (p. 284).

Covey’s last habit is sharpening the saw. This is you-time. In the midst of striving for your goals and being proactive – don’t forget to take some time to preserve and enhance your own sense of self. This is mental, physical, social/emotional and spiritual. Make sure to keep yourself on your priority list. Without a renewed and refreshed you, there is no goal for which to strive!

Key Advice

1. If you constantly say “There’s nothing I can do”, then chances are, there’s nothing you can do. Instead, look for what you can do.

2. Constantly keep your ultimate end goal in mind.

3. Think about how you can turn every situation into a “win/win” situation.

4. Listen more, talk less.

5. Take time for yourself!

11. Stop Whining, Start Living (Schlessinger, 2008)

Dr. Laura Schlessinger, best known as radio personality “Dr. Laura”, has authored nine New Your Times best-sellers, including The Proper Care and Feeding of Marriage. Her award winning internationally syndicated radio program is broadcast every day on more than two hundred and fifty stations.
Dr. Laura’s relationship and interpersonal advice can be readily translated to the person or organization suffering in a negative work “relationship”.

Summary

So much of a negative working environment can come from the time we all spend talking about how bad it is. Does talking about your environment really help? “At first it can help; later it probably hurts more than it helps” (p. 41). “Discussing problems as a means of finding a deeper understanding or solution is exceptionally healthy. Perpetual rumination is only destructive. Talking too much about problems reinforces the focus on the negative aspects of the problems and deepens the feelings of anxiety, depression and hopelessness” (p. 42). Dr. Laura goes on to discuss effective versus ineffective complaining. Ineffective complaining has an intent other than solving the problem, and is obviously something that should be avoided. Not only can ineffective complaining focus you back on the negative of the situation, it can also cause the people to whom you are complaining, to lose respect for you. “While that portrayal might get you some immediate sympathy and solicitous behavior, ultimately you will lose people’s interest and respect” (p. 46).

After all, whether you want it to or not, the situation you are in, says a lot about you to others. “The people and circumstances around me do not make me what I am, they reveal who I am” (p. 14). “Living” in a negative environment for too long, can rub off on you.

“Sometimes the simplest change in perspective has to do with how you see yourself. If you see yourself as “crippled”, then of course you’ll “limp”. If you see yourself as “healthy and strong”, then you’ll strut your stuff” (p. 37).
Many times when individuals feel like they have been “wronged”, they become fixated on wanting closure from the party who has “wronged them”. Dr. Laura explains that closure isn’t always necessary and sometimes is simply not possible. Trying to make things different by going over them again and again only fixates you in the past (p. 48). The less you behave like you care about your negative situation, the less you will come to care. The less you care the more you can stay on track with your personal mission and the more frustrated the bad guys become because their mission is destruction. Your happiness thwarts that (p. 65).

Dr. Laura also encourages individuals to look for the good in the situation, and try to “edit out” the bad. “Every person or situation generally has good or bad going for it. Unless the bad is dangerous or destructive, edit it out and embrace the good (p. 69). Remember the old saying, “I wept because I had not shoes until I saw a man who had no feet” (p. 73)? Say no to self-indulgent wallowing, and try to focus on the positive side of the situation, even if it doesn’t seem very positive.

“Whining and suffering are a safe place to be. You’ll get sympathy and they serve to protect you from further hurt or disappointment. The downside is that you stop living. Living includes ups and downs to celebrate or endure, disappointments and frustrations to overcome, triumphs and failures to balance, and love and loss to grow from” (p. 77). Are you whining because suffering is a safe place to be? The other side of suffering can be scary, because you don’t know what’s over there. However, if you are perpetually suffering, are you really living? What we can’t change or fix must be endured. “That means the whining stops because you set your mind, heart and soul to make the best out of a situation you’d rather not be in - but it is too late. (p. 183)” Who knows, enough of
making the best and enduring the situation, might actually completely change the situation for the better!

Key Advice

1. While discussing a situation can at times be extremely helpful, ineffective complaining can focus you back on the negative of the situation.

2. Consider if it is wise to discuss your current situation, before you share it with others. Ask yourself “Is talking about this situation really helping”? Consider how others might view you, before discussing the situation.

3. Ask yourself: Have I stayed in a state of suffering for too long? It can be scary to move on from a state of suffering, but even by pretending to make the best of the new situation can help you actually make the best of the new situation. Give it a try!

4. Ask yourself: How do the people around me and circumstances I am in, reveal who I am?

5. The less you behave like you care about your negative situation, the less you will come to care. There may be some truth to that old saying “Fake it ‘till you make it!”

12. *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001)

Marcus Buckingham is a motivational speaker, trainer, public leader, researcher and author, and was a senior researcher with the Gallup Organization, helping develop the strengths based approach to management. He coauthored the bestselling book *First,
Break All the Rules. Donald Clifton was the chairman of the Gallup Organization and was the chief designer of the StrengthsFinder Profile.

Summary

Billion dollar investor Warren Buffet figured out something that can serve as a practical guide for all of us. Look inside yourself, try to identify your strongest threads, reinforce them with practice and learning, and then either find or, as he did, carve out a role that draws on those strengths every day. “When you do, you will be more productive, more fulfilled, and more successful” (p. 21). Many hugely successful people, throughout very different fields, have found success and fulfillment in their work in because they intentionally played to their strengths. Strengths are activities you are able to do consistently (p. 26). You do not have to have strength in every aspect of your role in order to excel. But you will only excel by maximizing your strengths – never by fixing your weaknesses.

Constantly seek out ways to increase your strengths. “Every environment offers chances to learn. Clearly, to develop your strengths it is your responsibility to keep alert for these learning opportunities and then to incorporate them into your performance” (p. 43).

Key Advice

1. Strengths are activities you do consistently.

2. Successful people, throughout very different fields, have found success and fulfillment in their work in because they intentionally played to their strengths.

3. Identify three of your strongest strengths.
4. Look for opportunities that draw on those strengths! That can mean looking for opportunities within your current work environment that draw to your strengths, or even looking for a new job opportunities that is more in tune with your specific strengths.

5. In every environment you find yourself, look for learning opportunities that will help develop your strengths!
Chapter Three
COMMON THEMES

Amazingly, twelve completely different books have yielded several very common themes. The themes which seemed to emerge from the dozen books can be filtered down to three major key themes to overcome a negative work environment:

1. Accept ownership over the situation
2. Make the best of the situation
3. Take action to change the situation

Theme 1: Ownership over your situation is the key to overcoming your negative work environment.

If your negative work environment is always someone else’s fault, you will never overcome that situation. Blaming a “bad” manager, or other external force, is the easiest and least effective way to come out of a negative work environment. As long as the situation isn’t my fault, I will never have to do anything to about it.

Steps you can take:

- Ask: What are the top three specific issues that are making your work environment so negative? Take some time to think about what they are, and then write them down.

- Ask: What are some specific steps you can take to help address those issues? (Your first response may be “there is NOTHING I can do, it’s my manager’s fault, etc.) That is reactive thinking, which will never help the situation. Try to stop that reactive thinking. This is your chance to make a change in your environment. For example, if your situation was that your manager never speaks
to you; then maybe your specific step could be for you to take the initiative each day next week to speak to him or her. Tell him or her that you’d like to touch base a little more often. What’s the worst that can happen? They say they’re too busy? Then perhaps you can schedule an appointment. At least you made an effort.

Brainstorm as many ideas as possible for ways that you can help address the three situations you listed above. Then try them! What is the worst thing that can happen by trying? Are you going to get fired simply for talking to your boss? A few more examples steps you can take are listed below.

1. My manager never speaks with me. Specific Step: Take the initiative to speak to him or her. Tell him or her that you’d like to touch base a little more often.

2. My co-workers are always coming to talk to me, and I can’t get any work done. Specific Step: Can you ask them if you can touch base over lunch? Can you try standing up after they have been speaking for a few minutes, and see if they take the hint that you need to get back to your work?

3. Every time I present an idea, my supervisor shoots it down. Specific Step: Is there a way you can present your idea, in a less threatening manner? Is there someone else you can present your ideas to?

There are always little changes you can make, that might have a surprisingly positive impact on your negative situation.

*Theme 2: Much of successful living is learning to make the best of a less than ideal situation.*
So much of our lives are our reaction to our situation. It has been said that life is 10% what happens to you, and 90% your reaction to it. Even though your current situation may seem terribly negative, try and make a list of at least five things that you are really thankful for in your current work environment. Maybe it’s the people you work with, or maybe it’s the fact that you have an easy commute to work. Focusing on the good aspects of your negative environment may help you shift your perspective to a more positive outlook. Try making a list of all the things you DO like about your current job. Is there a way to alter your day so you can do more of those things?

By forcing yourself to constantly look for your opportunity to make the best of your situations, will not only help you overcome negative environments you encounter, but it will help lead to your own success.

*Theme 3: Focus on what it is you want, try something to get it, and if that doesn’t work, try something else.*

If you hate your job, DO NOT focus on the fact that you hate your job. This may seem like the natural thing to focus on, but the more you focus on how much you dislike it, the more unhappy you will be. Instead, try and determine what it is that you want to change. What is it that you really want? Once you have a clear picture of your ultimate goal, take specific steps to try to achieve that goal, and keep trying different steps, until you achieve that goal. Do you want to be more organized? Do you want to be promoted to supervisor? Do you want to get more responsibility? Whatever your goal, it is up to you to make steps to achieve it. If your steps don’t work, learn from what you tried, and keep trying new ways to get to your ultimate goal. Eventually, you WILL get there!
Implications for Individuals, Organizations and HRD

Given the common themes of this literature review, individuals should now realize that much of overcoming a negative work environment is their own individual responsibility. Individuals need to consider how they can take ownership over their situation, how they can make the best of their current negative work environment, and what specific actions they can take to change that negative work environment. After taking such steps, if the individual feels that the environment is still not a good environment, they should consider their own strengths, and see if they can find a new role or position which is a better match for their individual strengths. Individuals should be realistic but optimistic in their search.

Similarly, organizations that realize that their work environment is one of negativity should also, from the top down, consider what changes can be made to help make the environment more positive. Organizations should realize, however, that they will not be able to please everyone, and should consider what the best win/win situation would be, even if every single situation is not immediately resolved. Finally, the organization should consider what specific actions they can take to change the environment. This could include an all-company meeting where the senior management reveals the new direction for the entire company. Or it could include training for managers and supervisors on some specific techniques to help value their employees, such as addressing Lencioni’s (2007) immeasurability, irrelevance, and anonymity.

Finally, this literature review contributes to the field of Human Resource Development in that it provides a useful summary for Human Resource practitioners who
are constantly looking to help their organization and the employees within the organization make the best of their daily work experience.

*Future Research*

The topic of overcoming a negative work environment is certainly something that can be further researched to determine additional themes or the causes of negative work environments, and to determine additional advice for overcoming that negative work environment. Case studies could be conducted in organizations to obtain specific examples of both negative and positive work environments, and the specific contributing factors to each type of environment. Further research could also be conducted to determine if the climate of a work environment is set by the top management, middle management, employees, or some other source. It would be interesting to see how much of an impact an employee’s *direct* manager has on the work environment of that employee. Additionally, further research could be conducted to determine if specific types of industries tend to be more positive or negative in their work environments.

*CONCLUSION*

The three major keys for overcoming a negative work environment are:

1. Take ownership over your situation
2. Learn to be optimistic, and make the best of every situation
3. Focus on what it is that you want, and then try to achieve that goal until you get it
You are not in a dress rehearsal for your life. We only live once, and it is now. If you are in a negative work environment, NOW is the time to make the changes you need to make it a better situation. Of course, there are times when the best option for overcoming a really negative work environment is to leave that environment. However, you will face negative environments in some form or other anywhere you go – so it is important to learn to master these simple principles. You can do it!
REFERENCES


