Turning Around Negative Attitudes

Given the current economic environment and air of uncertainty that persists, negative employee attitudes and beliefs that tend to surface during these times need to be addressed because they can create a culture of failure. These attitudes which can typically be linked to organizational trauma, like down-sizing, budget restraints or workload increases, also can evolve over time with no apparent reason. The negative organization is characterized by increased complaining, a focus on reasons why things can't be done, and what seems to be a lack of hope that things will improve.

What can be done to stem the tide and reverse these feelings? Arthur Beck and Ellis Hillmar, professors in organization development, offer some ideas from their article "What Managers Can Do To Turn Around Negative Attitudes."

Model Positive Behavior
It's obvious that if management is talking in a negative way, staff will follow. Instead take a positive approach by showing confidence in your staff and their abilities. Support staff, hold them accountable, and communicate clearly and honestly. Set standards for your own work and relations with employees, and work towards meeting them to set an example of positive behavior.

Acknowledge Negativity
You can't ignore negativity and expect it to go away. If you don't acknowledge it, then staff will feel that you are out of touch, and they will not be confident in your abilities. Acknowledge the frustration and negative feelings, and don't try to convince the person or people that they shouldn't have their negative feelings. Rather, ask for suggestions regarding what to do about them.

Identify The Positives In All Situations
Sometimes we forget to find positives. When an employee offers an impractical solution, we may be quick to dismiss the idea. We should identify the effort while discussing the idea. Look for small victories, and talk about them. Turning a negative organization into a positive one is a result of thousands of little actions.

Give Positive Recognition Often
Provide positive recognition as soon as you find out about good performance. Do not couple praise with suggestions for improvement. Separate them. Combining them devalues the recognition for many people.

Refrain From Collusion On Negativity
It's easy to get caught in general complaining, particularly in informal discussions. When faced with negative conversations, consider changing the subject, comment on the negative content ("Let's talk about something more pleasant"), or ask what can be done about the situation (move from a negative to positive slant).

It is not uncommon for organizations to go through periods of negativity. Managers play important roles in determining if that negativity will increase, or whether the trough is relatively short. Above all, remember that it's the little things that you do on a daily basis that make the biggest difference.