Dangers of Toxic Positivity in the Workplace

By Adecco

Toxic positivity: This "fake it till you make it" attitude is not only disingenuous, but it can also make your employees feel unappreciated and burnt out, hurting your business in the long run.

While looking on the bright side seems good for company morale, toxic positivity in the workplace can leave many employees feeling pressured to put on a happy face when speaking with management – and be the catalyst for decreased engagement and a rise in quiet quitting.

What is toxic positivity?

Toxic positivity, as defined by Psychology Today, is "the act of avoiding, suppressing, or rejecting negative emotions or experiences." Most commonly, it takes the form of denying an employee's emotions of stress, sadness, or anger, and insisting on positive thinking instead. And while denying negative emotions may be necessary temporarily, like when one must give an important presentation, it's the constant rejection of these emotions that is harmful.

Psychologists reveal that toxic positivity is a pattern of behavior rather than isolated instances. If an employee speaks to their manager in their one-on-one meetings about something that is distressing them and they are constantly told to "try to be positive" or "it's all for the best," they can experience emotional suppression and feel as though their manager does not take their honest feelings into account.

This emotional suppression not only fails to resolve the underlying problem as to why an employee feels such a way but can lead to even more feelings of anxiety, guilt, and shame, effectively handicapping the productivity of a worker. Emotional inclusion, brought on by managers asking how their employees can be supported instead of denying their feelings, however, can foster authenticity and leave workers with the impression that their company genuinely cares about their well-being.

How does toxic positivity in the workplace hurt businesses?

- **Workers feel burnt out:** Recent research has revealed that toxic positivity in the workplace can actually make employees physically sick, as faking happiness at work is associated with more anxiety, higher heart rates, and an increase in the likelihood of cardiovascular problems. It's no surprise then that repeated exposure to toxic positivity fosters chronic stress, leading to widespread employee burnout.

- **Managers don't get honest feedback:** When a manager prioritizes only positive emotions, workers don't feel comfortable expressing negative thoughts or feedback. This is detrimental to all areas of business as managers don't get accurate insight into any problems employees are facing and if a worker is likely to leave the organization. When managers ask for feedback, they need to create an environment where emotional inclusion is present to allow the employees to be open and honest in their viewpoints.

- **Toxic positivity is associated with "quiet quitting":** Quiet quitting has become a major concern for businesses since the pandemic. 1 in 4 US workers has experienced a drop in engagement and productivity as companies across the country struggle to keep their workforce engaged. Toxic

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positivity can foster quiet quitting, especially in younger workers, as employees feel unsupported and frustrated, and that they can't be their authentic selves in their current workplace.

What can employers do?

- **Ask employees how they'd like to be supported:** When an employee tells you they're having a hard time either in their home or work life think about your reaction. Instead of saying "you'll be okay" take the time to ask how you can help them. They'll leave the conversation feeling heard and supported.

- **Normalize and promote mental well-being at work:** Toxic positivity can have drastic impacts on employee mental health. To combat this, create a company culture where mental health is a priority. This can be as simple as managers advocating for self-care to offering specific mental health benefits like teletherapy and the Employee Assistance Program.

- **Lessen employee stress:** Many employees feel burnt out and experience mental health dangers from overworking. Toxic positivity only exacerbates this stress leaving employees quitting for a more supportive environment. Encourage your employees to create a better work-life balance by disconnecting fully after work. They'll feel that you as a manager are invested in their well-being and that they're not just a cog in the machine.

- **Designate spaces to process emotions:** Emotions aren't just felt in one-on-one meetings and employee reviews. If you can, create spaces that allow privacy and the opportunity to process difficult emotions. Some workplaces are even going as far as to install sound proofing in these rooms to allow employees to freely express their emotions and then return to their desks.

References:
https://www.adeccousa.com/employers/resources/toxic-positivity-in-the-workplace/